

A Reputation is an Easy Thing to Lose

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/4718084) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/4718084>.

Rating:

Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:

Major Character Death

Category:

F/M

Fandom:

Pride and Prejudice (2005), Pride and Prejudice - Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice - All Media Types

Relationship:

Jane Bennet/Charles Bingley, Lydia Bennet/George Wickham, Elizabeth Bennet/Fitzwilliam Darcy, Caroline Bingley/Fitzwilliam Darcy, Caroline Bingley/Original Character(s), Lydia Bennet/Original Character(s), Georgiana Darcy/Original Male Character(s)

Character:

Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Bennet, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Charles Bingley, Lydia Bennet, Mr. Bennet (Pride and Prejudice), Mrs. Bennet (Pride and Prejudice), Mary Bennet, Catherine Bennet, George Wickham, Georgiana Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam (Pride and Prejudice), William Collins, Charlotte Lucas, Catherine de Bourgh, Anne de Bourgh, Caroline Bingley, Louisa Hurst, Mr. Hurst (Pride and Prejudice), Mrs. Gardiner (Pride and Prejudice), Edward Gardiner, Original Characters, Mrs. Reynolds (Pride and Prejudice), Mr. Phillips (Pride and Prejudice), Mrs. Phillips (Pride and Prejudice)

Additional Tags:

What-If, POV Multiple, Selfish Caroline, Lydia OOC

Series:

Part 2 of [Reputation](#)

Stats:

Published: 2015-09-03 Completed: 2019-03-24 Chapters: 38/38
Words: 126007

A Reputation is an Easy Thing to Lose

by Stormsmith

Summary

What if Mr. Bennet died in a duel with Wickham after Lydia eloped, just as Mrs. Bennet feared? Will Elizabeth and Darcy still find their happily-ever-after? Elizabeth Bennet hotly rejected Fitzwilliam Darcy's marriage proposal nearly four months ago, but now she wonders if that was the biggest mistake of her life. Orphaned and living with her Aunt and Uncle Gardiner in London, Elizabeth is determined to take a position as a governess or companion. There is no need to wait, she believes Darcy could not renew his attentions to her after her family's disgrace. Which is a shame because she now knows that she might just love him. Fitzwilliam Darcy would do anything for Elizabeth. He rushed to London as soon as hearing about Lydia Bennet's elopement to try to find Wickham and put everything to rights. But his journey was fruitless. Then all Darcy's effort was wasted when Mr. Bennet died of his wounds before Darcy could bring a doctor to tend to him. Now, he must convince Elizabeth to forgive and marry him before all hope is lost. Follow our favourite Austen lovers through sacrifice, frustration, a secret marriage, and a whole lot of shenanigans from the marriage minded ladies of London.

Notes

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by E.M. Storm-Smith

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Reputation, An Easy Thing to Lose / E.M. Storm-Smith -- 1st ed.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Discovery

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

14 August 1812

How many times will my pride and arrogance render me unworthy of Elizabeth's love? First it was my aloof and cool demeanor in Meryton that earned me her poor opinion. Then my damned tongue in Hunsford rightfully stroked her ire. Next my desire to keep my sister's heartbreak private allowed that scoundrel to have free reign of the maidens in Hertfordshire and Brighton. Finally, my arrogance in thinking I would be able to locate the reprobate instantly has potentially cost a man his life. She will never forgive me.

Having left Pemberley at first light the morning after Elizabeth and the Gardiners began their return to Longbourn, I have been in London for three days and four nights. My foolish goal was to gather information about Wickham's whereabouts before consulting Mr. Bennet and Mr. Gardiner, but I have been unable to make any progress because, unbeknownst to me, the scoundrel was already dead. Finally deciding to call on the Gardiners, I made my way to Gracechurch Street in Cheapside this morning as soon as it was respectable. Pulling up to the address, I noticed the black ribbon draped over the door and felt my stomach begin to revolt against the toast and coffee residing within. Deciding to request an audience with Mr. Gardiner despite it being atrocious manners to call uninvited on a family newly in mourning, I made my way into the house. Stunned to see a despondent Miss Lydia sitting in the drawing room with Mrs. Gardiner, I didn't even notice the body laid out on the low table near the north windows. Before I could recover enough to even bow to my hostess, Mrs. Gardiner took pity on me and directed the butler to take me to Mr. Gardiner's study across the hall.

Once seated with a large brandy in my hand, Mr. Gardiner informed me as to the happenings in London. Mr. Thomas Bennet, Esq., after learning of Miss Lydia's elopement, began to speak to anyone who knew Wickham in order to try and determine where he might go. What he learned instead was of the numerous and large debts Wickham left behind in Meryton as well as at least three debts of honour with daughters of the local merchants. Being shocked at the behaviour of a supposed gentlemen officer and angry that his

youngest child had been taken in by such a disreputable character, Mr. Bennet fled to London as fast as he could then searched every boarding house between Southwark and Covent Garden looking for the couple. Gardiner told me that his brother had also confessed to being desperate to prove to Elizabeth that he could protect his family. Apparently she had begged him not to let Miss Lydia go to Brighton with only the young Mrs. Forster and Colonel as chaperones. *Make the doors upon a woman's wit, and it will out at the casement; shut that, and 'twill out at the key-hole; stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney*^[1].

On August 6th, after searching for only 2 full days, Mr. Bennet found Wickham and Miss Lydia holed up in a disgusting one room apartment just north of Covent Garden. The house is a well-known middle-class brothel and Lt. Denny had apparently mentioned to Colonel Forster that Wickham was familiar with the madam of the house. This information was passed on to Mr. Bennet during the Colonel's short visit to Longbourn after the couple eloped. Just think, Mr. Bennet had already found the couple while Elizabeth and her aunt were being entertained by Georgiana in Pemberley's music room. We were all together and smiling while her family's entire world held in the balance.

Finding Wickham unwilling to proceed directly to Doctor's Commons to procure a special license, Mr. Bennet challenged the degenerate to a duel. The next morning, 7 August 1812, at dawn Mr. Bennet shot Wickham through the heart, killing him instantly. Wickham was dead before Elizabeth even opened Jane's letters in Lambton.

This is the only part of the story I relish, he will never harm anyone ever again.

Now I wish I could put my pen down and enjoy a cigar and brandy with my cousin over Wickham's dead body, because that is exactly how the good Colonel will react to this news, but I will have to eschew Richard's celebration for the story does not end here.

Wickham may have chosen poorly when he decided upon pistols as the quiet and bookish Mr. Bennet was apparently the head of the Oxford shooting club in his university days, but the rake did not entirely miss his mark. Wickham's shot went south as he was felled and struck Elizabeth's beloved father in the upper leg, lodging the bullet in the thick bone. Miss Lydia was able to support her father back to the Gardiner's Cheapside home in a hackney coach but was unable to care for his wounds. Before I or the Gardiners made it back

to London, an infection had taken over the older gentlemen's wound. Without the immediate funds to procure a reputable surgeon willing to amputate the infected leg, Mr. Bennet slowly succumbed to fever and died yesterday.

Yesterday. He died just yesterday, the 13th day of August in the year of our Lord 1812.

And now we come to the part of the story that details my pride and arrogance costing a man his life. Not just any man, oh no! But the most important man in Elizabeth Bennet's life. Her gentle, intelligent, witty beloved father. The man who educated her and gave her that sparkle in her eyes that makes my heart leap for joy. The man I had hoped to call father myself. How many hours could we have enjoyed during Elizabeth's and my engagement discussing books over port in his library? What stories of Elizabeth's childhood would he have told me whilst I bided my time before taking her as my wife? Would he have proved to have that same dry wit as his favorite daughter? Would his lip and eyebrow have quirked up upon finding his opponent worthy of the discussion as Elizabeth's do?

Had I only made my way directly to Cheapside on August 10th instead of traipsing aimlessly around London thinking I knew what was best! I could have immediately brought my physician to Mr. Bennet and had the leg amputated. The infection might not have spread so far in the last few days and I could have possibly saved his life with nothing more than £50.

How can she ever forgive me?

[i] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act 4 Scene 1.

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Pragmatism

Chapter Notes

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of my first ever story. Please leave comments with honest feedback. I have no beta, so all mistakes are my own.

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

15 August 1812

I made another trip to the Gardiners' home today in order to offer my assistance in any way that was possible. Upon being admitted to the study, I found Edward (Mr. Gardiner asked me to address him less formally after I offered the same yesterday) sitting at his desk with a large glass of whiskey already in hand and a despondent look in his eyes. Miss Lydia had been sent back to Longbourn early this morning with Mrs. Gardiner in a post chaise. The rest of the Bennet women have yet to be informed of Mr. Bennet's death and this unfortunate job now falls to the youngest Bennet sister and Mrs. Bennet's sister-in-law. Edward has stayed behind to take care of arrangements for the body to be transported to the Longbourn cemetery and make the necessary legal notifications as executor of Mr. Bennet's estate.

While yesterday I considered the situation merely desperately sad and any chance of winning Elizabeth's hand nearly hopeless, today I understand myself to be in the midst of a true nightmare. Mr. Bennet's ancestral home and all the lands surrounding Longbourn are entailed to Mr. William Collins. The same obsequious little man to whom my Aunt Catherine has bestowed the Hunsford Living. The same idiot that I had to endure for three consecutive Sunday sermons and at dinner several times during my Easter visit to Lady Catherine. Oh how he fawned over every word my condescending Aunt spoke! That man will never be able to run an estate even half the size of Longbourn. I'm sure the estate will be in ruin before Mr. Bennet is cold in his grave.

To make matters worse, Edward also told me that Collins came to Longbourn last fall in order to choose a bride from amongst the Bennet sisters and made an offer to Elizabeth the day after the ball at Netherfield. Being a woman of sound mind, she obviously refused him over the loud demands of her mother. Although apparently Mr. Bennet

sided strongly with Elizabeth's refusal, had she married Collins, the Bennet women would not now be facing the loss of their home and standing in society. My heart cannot help but be glad that she is not married to that ridiculous man, but since I doubt I will ever be able to win her heart for my own, I can see how much better the whole family would be situated had she complied with her mother's demands.

To be at the mercy of Mr. Collins! But even worse, to be at the (nonexistent) mercy of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. If word of Miss Lydia's elopement reaches her, she will quarter no argument and spread the Bennet family's misfortune around to any who will listen. I bet they will be turned out before the New Year.

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Hope

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

31 August 1812

Not even one month! My aunt is truly a horrific harpy with only blackness in her heart and deserves nothing but pain and suffering and boils and a life forever plagued by gout!

Lady Catherine insisted that Collins take possession of Longbourn as soon as his horse could make the journey from Kent to Hertfordshire. Thankfully Mrs. Collins, the former Miss Charlotte Lucas and particular friend of Elizabeth, intervened and insisted that it would be atrocious manners as well as poor Christian charity to turn out the widow before the funeral. Appealing to Collins's overinflated opinion of himself and reminding her idiot of a husband that the Bennet's are well liked in the area, she was able to convince Collins that their reception in Meryton would be quite cold if they were to follow Lady Catherine's directions. So Mrs. Bennet and the five Misses Bennets had two weeks to pack all of their personal belongings, arrange for their future living situations, and bury their beloved husband and father.

Edward has been a wonderful correspondent during this time. He's been keeping me informed on the welfare of the family since it would not be proper for myself, someone supposedly so wholly unconnected with the family, to attend the funeral. So it is from his letters that I can say Mr. Bennet was interred five days ago at the edge of the Longbourn cemetery under a large willow tree. Elizabeth chose the specific location as one of particular peace. Edward said that as a child she had often climbed that particular tree to escape the chaos of the house and to read from one of her father's precious books. Now all of those books belong to Mr. William Collins, the most idiotic clergyman in all of England.

The morning following the funeral, Miss Jane Bennet and Elizabeth accompanied the Gardiners back to London where they are now to reside. Apparently Mrs. Bennet's anger at Elizabeth's state of not-married-to-Collins has resurfaced and she has been particularly abusive to my beautiful love since Miss Lydia and Mrs. Gardiner arrived with the news of Mr. Bennet's death. She even went so far as to insist that Elizabeth not be allowed to go to London, where she

believes there is the greatest chance of finding husbands, as, according to her mother, Elizabeth is not worthy of marriage. Thankfully, Edward and Mrs. Bennet's other brother, Mr. Phillips, were unyielding. Miss Bennet and Elizabeth would go with the Gardiners, Mrs. Bennet and the youngest three Miss Bennets are to live with Mr. and Mrs. Phillips in Meryton.

Now all six Bennet women have merely £5,000 to sustain them for the remainder of their lives unless by some miracle they marry. Who would want them now? If only I could convince Elizabeth to be my wife then we could sponsor Miss Bennet immediately and surely find her a husband. In fact, I'm sure Bingley will overlook the youngest sister's scandal if he loves Miss Bennet as much as he professes. Once the eldest two are married, between Bingley, Gardiner, Phillips, and myself we could surly find husbands for Miss Mary and Miss Kitty. There is little point to planning for Miss Lydia before we know the extent of her consequences or the amount of talk which will be garnered by her elopement, but £5,000 for only Mrs. Bennet and Miss Lydia is a much better prospect than for all six.

Perhaps if I speak to Edward of my thoughts he will agree and then together we can present the idea to Elizabeth. Though she may never forgive me for all the pain I have caused her family, if we explained that our marriage would be the means of saving her sisters and bringing Bingley back to Miss Bennet she may just agree. I know she is not totally indifferent to me and that during our short few days together at Pemberley we had begun to be friends. In time, I hope I can become worthy of her love or at least her respect. I would of course never impose myself upon her or take what she was unwilling to give. Even if it takes all of our lives, I will be content to know that I have redeemed myself by saving her family.

Yes, I will talk to Edward.

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Heart

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

7 September 1812

Today I gave into my heart and called at the Gardiner home. Miss Bennet and Elizabeth were not at home to visitors due to their mourning, but I caught a glimpse of Elizabeth as she crossed into the back parlor. Her fine eyes that have often sparkled with laughter and wit looked so sad. If she will let me, I will dedicate my entire life to making her smile again.

I have decided to wait to discuss my plan to marry Elizabeth with Edward until the end of her first period of mourning which will be on 8 October 1812. At that time it will be acceptable for Elizabeth to take calls during the morning hours and I will be able to see her again. It would be a horrible breach of propriety to become engaged before at least her mother is out of full mourning and into half mourning, a full six months from 13 August, but an understanding would go far to improving the situation for everyone. Perhaps Bingley could reach a similar understanding with Miss Bennet and we could be wed in a double ceremony at Pemberley in the spring. Likely not before April 1813. I may be married to Elizabeth before the roses in my mother's favorite garden are in full bloom. One year after my disastrous proposal in Hunsford. How time and circumstances have taken their toll, but just one more month to wait before I can put my hopes and heart before Elizabeth and pray that she sees something of worth in my proposal this time around.

During my visit, Edward said that yesterday brought some good news from Longbourn. Mr. Bennet's will had left each of the sisters £50 per annum upon marriage from the interest on Mrs. Bennet's settlement. Since it would be impossible to live off of the principle and maintain the annuity, Edward and Mr. Phillips have been trying to figure out how to fulfil the income to the daughters in order to sustain any hope whatsoever that they may marry. The good news was that the forever practical and truly kind Mrs. Collins has once again come to the aide of the Bennet sisters. She has convinced Mr. Collins to provide the annual income to the sisters starting now in the form of an annuity account.

Since the estate has gone from supporting seven adults to only two, the household costs have decreased significantly. Mrs. Collins was able to save nearly £400 per year in food, candles, clothing, smelling salts, and other sundry. Setting aside £250 per year in order to provide for the sisters' promised income would still leave the house with £150 in savings and, of course, the charity to their poor relations will buy much more in good will from the four and twenty families in the region. Apparently, in the short two weeks since taking possession of the house, Mr. Collins has not received the welcome he expected as both a newly instilled gentleman and a favorite of Lady Catherine. The annuity payments have been looked upon favorably by Mrs. Bennet's friends and in the few days since not so discretely making the arrangements with the local bank branch, several invitations have been proffered to Mr. and Mrs. Collins. Due to the success of the plan, Mrs. Collins has obtained Collins's agreement to provide the money for as long as the household has the excess.

Each sister will be able to access the interest immediately and the principal upon her twenty-first birthday or marriage. Miss Jane Bennet turned twenty-one last year and Elizabeth has only a few weeks until her birthday. The interest on £50 is hardly enough to buy enough fabric for one dress of medium quality muslin, but it is better than nothing.

Elizabeth's birthday, 3 October.

I had hoped to be able to give her a beautiful present as her betrothed. I would have gifted her one of my mother's jeweled hair combs to place in her glorious auburn curls. The one with the mother of pearl facing, small round white pearls, and silver teeth would stand out against her dark locks. Perhaps if we do come to an understanding on the 8th Edward would grant me the liberty of giving her a small token, nothing to damage her reputation, but something for her to hold at night and think of me. Perhaps a volume of poetry to show that my love is of the stout kind which is fed by the romantic verse.

Edward has also confided that the Gardiners have released their nursemaid and governess now that Elizabeth and Miss Bennet are living with them. He plans to take the money saved on their salaries and place it into an account for the two eldest Bennet sisters. He dares not tell either as they would most likely protest vehemently since he is already taking them into his home. Additionally, he fears telling Miss Bennet because she is too good of a child and would likely mention his generosity to her mother. Mrs. Bennet would no doubt demand that he provide a similar amount for the other sisters. If either Miss

Bennet or Elizabeth were to marry, Edward said he would be more than happy to offer Miss Mary to take her place and then provide the same account, but he cannot justify the expense on one of his nieces who is not currently residing in his home and helping rear his four children.

At least they will not be totally penniless.

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Heartache

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

21 September 1812

Out of respect for the Bennets' mourning I have waited a whole two weeks before again calling on Edward. Just as I had started to hope and once again plan for a life with Elizabeth by my side, my entire world is destroyed by George Wickham.

Miss Lydia is with child. Elizabeth's youngest sister, a child herself of barely sixteen, is carrying George Wickham's bastard.

Apparently, on the day Wickham eloped with Miss Lydia from Brighton, the first of August, they had already been intimate. It would certainly explain her willingness to follow him without any assurance of the destination or their eventual marriage. The babe quickened this week and the doctor believes that Miss Lydia will be delivered in late February or early March. The reprobate must have first seduced Miss Lydia not long after she had arrived in Brighton, about late May. So much for an April double wedding.

While Miss Lydia was never Elizabeth's preferred confidant, she still loves each of her sisters dearly. Now the youngest has been ruined completely and it is entirely my fault.

Of course the physical damage was done by Wickham, but he would never have been in a position to harm Miss Lydia if I had acted with less *selfish disdain for the feelings of others*. A *gentleman* would have protected the daughters of Meryton instead of putting his own family above the rest. It's not like I would have been required to expose Georgie in order to carry my point. I have paid enough of his debts in Lambton and Matlock to provide proof to the merchants that he is untrustworthy. Then a simple conversation with Sir William Lucas and Mr. Bennet as the leading gentlemen of the region about the three children placed with Pemberley tenants sired by Wickham would have been more than sufficient to protect the daughter of the gentry. But instead I let my damned pride and arrogance ruin the reputations of several young maidens and Miss Lydia's life.

Edward says that Elizabeth has become hardened by the news. She

blames herself for not revealing more of Wickham's character to her father and for relinquishing her arguments about Miss Lydia's trip to Brighton too easily. If she cannot forgive herself, how shall she ever forgive me?

Elizabeth is now determined that she will surely never marry due to Miss Lydia's shame and cannot be a burden on her aunt and uncle for the remainder of her life. She plans to take a position. At my horrified expression, Edward assured me that he has been trying to persuade Elizabeth to reconsider and has flatly refused to allow her to even contact a hiring agency while in mourning. For now, she cannot act without Edward's permission, but Elizabeth's twenty-first birthday is coming up and then she will technically be able to contract a position for herself.

This whole time, over six weeks since first walking into the Lambton Rose and Crown and finding Elizabeth in such a state of panic over Miss Bennet's letters, I have believed that the situation could be salvaged. I've been keeping in contact with Edward in order to save Elizabeth from her family's shame. To be the white knight charging in and righting all wrongs, exchanging Elizabeth's tears for laughter. To see a look of adoration in her eyes. But it has all been for me and my selfish desires. None of it has actually been about what would make Elizabeth or her family happy.

My misinformed and time wasting initial search of London proved to be a fool's errand that cost Mr. Bennet his life. The plan to use her family's situation and my friendly relationship with Edward to cajole her into a marriage that she doesn't want is the worst thing I've contemplated yet! To think I was actually deluding myself into thinking that she would be grateful for my proposal, that she would be able to grow to love me with time after I basically blackmailed her into marrying me through the offer to "save" her sisters. Would this proposal have been any different than the disdainful and arrogant one I offered her in Hunsford?

I must admit that I have not really changed, I am still selfish and arrogant. From now on I vow to consider the feelings of others first and abandon all of my ill-formed plans. I will have to grow accustomed to seeing her tear streaked face and sad eyes every time I close mine. Those fascinating, beautiful, intelligent eyes so full of sorrow because I did nothing to prevent it and can now do nothing to fix it.

Hopefully she will be able to secure a valuable position with a

reputable family before her sister's condition becomes widely known. Orphaned and almost penniless, the ward of a Cheapside tradesman without any formal education from a governess, it will not be easy. Perhaps the best I can do for her now is to provide a reference.

God! I hope the awful gossip of a housekeeper at Netherfield doesn't pass this on to Caroline Bingley!! I know Miss Bingley has been keeping tabs on the Bennets through the permanent Netherfield staff, but maybe the Bingley's and Hurst's trip to Yorkshire will delay any correspondence long enough for Elizabeth to be taken on by someone. Then again, with the kind of gossip Miss Bingley is likely to spread about, she could be dismissed easily.

It is indeed in every way horrible and I have not the slightest hope.

Prologue: Mr. Darcy's Sister

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Diary of Fitzwilliam George James Darcy

22 September 1812 – 3 AM

After finishing my last entry over an after dinner brandy, I proceeded to drink myself into a complete stupor. Without any hope for the future I decided that getting blind drunk was the only way to spend the next 30 years of my lonely and worthless life.

Thankfully my baby sister has knocked some sense into me. Georgie arrived in London two weeks ago with Mrs. Annesley. She became worried by my lack of correspondence and decided to see for herself the state of affairs with the Bennets. Before my mad dash across the English countryside in pursuit of a dead man, I only told her that Elizabeth's family had a small crisis and I was returning to London in order to assist the Gardiners in the resolution. There was no mention of Wickham's involvement or Miss Lydia's downfall. I wanted to shield her from the pain as well as protect the Bennets from Miss Bingley's sharp tongue. I did write her about Mr. Bennet's sudden death, but that was the only letter I had sent for over a month.

Since the last two weeks have been going fairly well for me with my delusional plans to wed Elizabeth in April, she was placated and no longer asked questions regarding the events that surrounded Mr. Bennet's untimely demise. Last night was a different story. Since I didn't return to the music room after dinner, she came looking for me to say goodnight before retiring. As I was already completely drunk and wallowing in self-pity by the time she came into the library, it was difficult to hide the truth any longer.

As only Georgie can, she gently pulled the entire story from me, including my terrible behaviour in Meryton last fall and the dreadfully rude, completely untrue, comment I made about Elizabeth at the assembly where we first met. I found myself even going into detail about my insults to her family made during a marriage proposal and how abysmally I have treated my best friend who is still pining after

Elizabeth's fair haired sister. Georgie listened patiently, patted my hand while I cried like a boy still in short pants, ordered tea and sweet breads to soak up the lingering alcohol in my stomach, and then told me to shape up! "*William*," she scolded in a tone chillingly similar to Lady Catharine, "*crying and self-pity are guaranteed not to solve any of the current problems, so what use are they?*"

For the first time in my life, I looked at my baby sister as the woman she is becoming rather than the child she has been.

Then, like the magnificent and intelligent woman I had hoped would someday be her sister, Georgie laid out a much better plan in five minutes than I had concocted in six weeks. First she said I must go straight over to the Gardiners' house tomorrow before calling time and ask Edward to speak to Elizabeth. "*How are you to know that she does not care for you when you have never asked her?*" Georgie is right, I have so misjudged Elizabeth's sentiments before that I am surely not to trust my own beliefs regarding her feelings.

Second, I am to offer all of my resources to the disposal of the Bennet family regardless of Elizabeth's answer. "*Be selfless and fear not for the scorn of society if word of our assistance were to become public. Allow for generosity and kindness to rule over the barbs of the ton.*"

The final piece of wisdom was truly amazing to me. "*Do you not love her in part because she has her own mind? Perhaps you should use it!*" Asking Elizabeth to help solve her own family's problems, how had I not considered it before?!? She is perhaps the most intelligent person I know and her compassion only makes her more valuable in dealing with problems of such a personal and emotional nature. To share the burden of responsibility with a true partner would surely be bliss.

So I am resolved. Today at first light I travel to Cheapside to once again offer my heart to the most worthy woman I have ever known. Hopefully she will see past all of my transgressions and find enough fondness for me to accept my proposal. If not, at least I hope she can forgive me enough to accept my help in lifting her family's burdens.

Perhaps I should attend to sleep now so that I do not appear a total dullard in the light.

Chapter End Notes

This concludes Mr. Darcy's diary for now. The real story can now begin.

Chapter 1: The Dawning of a New Day

Chapter Summary

The early morning calls to both Darcy and Elizabeth. After much heartache, they see each other again for the first time since receiving Jane's letters at the Lambton Rose and Crown.

Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London

22 September 1812

From her perch in the window seat of the second floor bedroom shared with her beloved sister, Elizabeth Bennet watched the sun rise over the top of the tower of St. Michael's Cornhill Abbey as the great bells announced a new day. Sighing, she put down her book and looked over to the peaceful form of Jane, still asleep in their bed. Soon the household would waken, there would be four small children to tend and much work to be accomplished before attempting to find oblivion in sleep once again. But for now, it seemed that the whole of London was welcoming her with the dawn.

It had been nearly a month since she and Jane had come to live with Aunt Madeline and Uncle Edward and each sunrise had been observed in the exact same manor by Elizabeth. Forever an early riser, Elizabeth had been finding it difficult to sleep more than a few hours since the dreadful August day she read Jane's account of Lydia and Wickham's elopement. Each morning at about 4am according to the mantle clock, Elizabeth wakes from dreams of a life she will never have, with a man far too good to be within her reach now, and rises from her bed. After stroking the fire, she lights a single candle and retrieves the only thing she has left of her beloved father, a well-loved first edition book of Cowper's poem, *The Task*. Sitting by the window and reading the familiar book about life in the English countryside is a balm to her heart, which yearns to wonder through untamed forests, while her body resides in one of the most crowded areas of London.

Not that living with the Gardiners has really been a hardship, they have always been unfailingly loving and kind. Living with her mother would certainly be infinitely more difficult, even if she were to have access to forest paths and green rolling hills. But Elizabeth is a young woman with a broken heart that nothing short of a miracle could

mend. So hopeless is her situation that she dare not even speak to Jane about her wishes and dreams because Jane's tender heart, still sore from the wounds of losing Mr. Bingley, would be crushed knowing that Elizabeth suffered. So every morning she would rise early and read of the idyllic country life that she doubts anyone has actually ever lived before the bells could announce a new day.

After donning one of her three full mourning gowns and wrapping in her black shawl, Elizabeth descended the stairs to the breakfast parlor. This early, only she, Cook, and Mrs. Mathers, the Gardiners' elderly housekeeper, were ever awake so Elizabeth enjoyed her tea in silence. After a few minutes in this repose, Elizabeth began to believe that her dreams had come into the waking world to taunt her because she was sure she recognized the massive black horse standing outside the breakfast window in the mews.

It had to be Incitatus for only one animal could ever be so beautiful and full of power, much like its owner. Elizabeth had first encountered this horse, named for the favorite mount of Rome's Emperor Caligula and the only animal to serve as a senator in the Roman Senate, during her stay at Netherfield while Jane was taken ill. Having risen with the sun, Elizabeth decided to take a walk in the morning dew in order to escape Miss Bingley's barbs and Mr. Darcy's quite stare. On her way back to the house she passed the stables and observed owner and mount in a sweet moment. Mr. Darcy, obviously just back from his morning ride, was trying to brush Incitatus's beautiful black coat while the horse was nosing his jacket pocket incessantly. Finally Mr. Darcy reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of sugar cubes pilfered from the sideboard in the breakfast room. Incitatus happily lapped up the treat while Mr. Darcy quietly chuckled, declaring the horse no better than a spoiled child. The encounter has always stayed with Elizabeth as the first time she had ever seen a smile grace Mr. Darcy's face. He is so handsome when he smiles.

Later that morning, in the drawing room, Elizabeth asked Mr. Darcy the name of his horse and they were both pleasantly surprised by the discussion of Roman history that continued for more than a quarter of an hour. If asked, Elizabeth would admit that this discussion was entirely pleasant and provided her emotions with an anchor for his

true nature after seeing him again at Pemberley, helping to awaken her love. Mr. Darcy would say that the day they discussed Roman history was the day he surrendered his heart to the lively and intelligent Miss Elizabeth. Unbeknownst to either participant, that conversation was also the launching point of another great passion, one born more of jealousy than heart. But we will speak of this more later.

Coming back to the present, Elizabeth quickly abandoned her tea, grabbed a handful of sugar cubes from her aunt's sideboard, and dashed out of the door to the kitchens leading directly to the mews. Elizabeth was aware that Mr. Darcy had called at least once several weeks ago, she had seen him as she crossed the vestibule into the south parlor, but since that day she had not seen him again nor had she asked her uncle if he had called again. She could not imagine what business Mr. Darcy had with her uncle, but by now he must have heard of her father's death and Mr. Collins's possession of Longbourn. A man of such great consequence might have overlooked Lydia's indiscretion or the loss of her father's estate, but surely not both. And now with the reality of Lydia's condition likely to become general knowledge as soon as Miss Bingley hears, he is forever lost to her.

Rounding the corner of the house, Elizabeth stopped dead in her tracks. There in the mews between her uncle's house and the courtyard of St. Michael's, in all of his enormous animal glory was indeed Incitatus. And holding the reins was Mr. Darcy.

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

22 September 1812

Unable to sleep for more than one fitful hour, Darcy rose from his bed at 4am and dressed for the day. Deciding to let his poor valet, Connor, sleep a little longer, he went down to the stables attached to his large Mayfair house and saddled Incitatus. Taking Rotten Row south through Hyde Park at a swift cantor, Darcy passed Buckingham Palace then traversed the Mall before slowing. Continuing down the Strand, the bells of St. Paul's Cathedral called to him just as the sun crested the horizon and bathed London in golden light. Before he knew where his heart had taken him, Darcy stood at the end of a neat row of

comfortable but modest homes. He knew that the fourth door from the corner, on the west side of the street held the Gardiner family and Elizabeth Bennet. Without thinking, Darcy led Incitatus to the mews behind Edward Gardiner's home and dismounted.

Finally waking from his reverie, Darcy was appalled at his impulsive behaviour. How had he ended up here so early without a proper shave and smelling of horse?!? He was supposed to be coming to win Elizabeth's heart, not muck the stalls. There was no way he could speak to her looking so disreputable! There was nothing for it, he would have to go back home, bathe and change then return in the phaeton. Being so late by the time all that was accomplished, he would have to wait until the proper calling time to appear and hope that no other visitors had chosen today to come least his request to speak with Elizabeth be observed by anyone other than her uncle. Perhaps Georgie would be awake and willing to come with him to pay her respects to the Gardiners and run interference with Mrs. Gardiner's other guests. This was her idea after all!

While he contemplated going back to Mayfair to prepare for his interview with Elizabeth, the object of his thoughts rounded the corner in significant haste. Upon seeing Mr. Darcy in the flesh, she halted and dropped the pilfered sugar cubes onto the ground at her feet. Though Darcy remained oblivious to Elizabeth's entrance, Incitatus did not. Seeing the free sugar lying about, the massive animal crossed the short distance to Elizabeth dragging Darcy along by the reins. Darcy stumbled from the sudden movement of his horse and crashed directly into the waiting arms of Elizabeth. Coming face to face after so many anguish filled weeks was enough to vanquish every rational thought from either's mind. Without thinking about mourning her lost father or whether anyone might oversee them, Darcy brought his lips to Elizabeth's waiting mouth for an urgent and passionate kiss.

Chapter 2: Correspondence with a Gossip

Chapter Summary

Caroline Bingley shall have her say.

Wilton Row, Belgravia, London

22 September 1812

Caroline Bingley reclined on her favorite chaise lounge in the north parlor of her brother's London townhouse. While most would prefer to sit in a south facing room during the morning hours in order to take advantage of the light from the rising sun, Caroline had always preferred this spot for its perfect view of S. Carriage Drive, the road surrounding Hyde Park from the south and leading to the fashionable park drives. Though the Bingley townhouse was a few streets south of Knightsbridge, there was the perfect combination of courtyards and one story buildings directly between the room's middle window and the intersection of Rotten Way and S. Carriage Drive. Here is where Caroline would spend hours watching the residents of London on their comings and goings.

It was an advantageous spot to be sure, and if only she had risen earlier, Caroline would have seen Mr. Darcy flying through the park on his massive horse towards Cheapside at dawn. As it were, Caroline did not see Mr. Darcy that morning and in fact had no actual knowledge of his current whereabouts. Caroline was becoming quite annoyed. This was supposed to be her time! She was supposed to ascend to the top rung of the London social ladder that, for a woman, can only come with marriage to a man of wealth and land. Such injustice in this world! It's not as if she were unworthy to reach the highest echelons of the *ton* on her own merit. She had the finest education, was poised, beautiful, and had a dowry to rival any daughter of the peers! But instead of enjoying the position that should have come with her money and accomplishments, she wasn't even considered a gentlewoman. The rules of society dictated that it takes three generations to make a gentleman and her grandfather was born low to a tenant sheep farmer outside of Halifax.

During his life, Andrew Bingley worked on the sheep farm with his father and older brothers until his parents could no longer keep him.

After being sent on his way, Andrew secured work at a large wool mill in Bradford. As a shrewd, opportunistic young man, Andrew quickly courted the favor of the mill's owner and rose through the ranks. The other low born mill workers resented the favoritism showed Andrew, but what did he care, he was going to make something of himself no matter who he had to step on to advance. After not too many years, Andrew convinced the owner to sign a marriage contract for his oldest daughter. Upon her 15th birthday, Andrew took her as his wife and proceeded to produce an heir with haste. Caroline's father, Richard Bingley, was brought into this world as her grandmother left it. A widower at only 29, Andrew did not truly mourn the loss of his young wife. Wives and children cost money, so Andrew consider the situation ideal. He had what he wanted, the first born grandson to the mill's owner, and would only have to incur the expense of feeding one additional person on a mill foreman's salary.

As Caroline's father grew, Andrew encouraged a close relationship with his grandfather. The interaction between grandfather and grandson allowed for natural affection and years of gentle nudging to fuel an eventual change in inheritance. The aging mill owner decided to overlook his other children and leave his mill, in whole, to his beloved grandson. Andrew was named trustee until Richard was able to take control.

Richard was a disappointment to his father. In manner and temperament he too greatly resembled his soft hearted grandfather and but at least he was easily led. Traits Richard passed on to his own son, Charles. Another advantageous arranged marriage between Richard and the only child of a large operation cloth maker in Leeds allowed Andrew to facilitate an expansion of the business. The savings from integrating the wool milling and cloth making businesses allowed for a doubling of profit in the first five years of Richard's marriage. Procurement of additional automation machinery developed in Scotland allowed even more savings by reducing the number of workers drawing a salary while maintaining output. The Bingleys quickly amassed a fortune of nearly £100,000.

Richard and his wife, who actually cared greatly for each other despite their contracted marriage, produced Louisa and Caroline quickly after their marriage. Though the doctors advised that another pregnancy was not likely to end favorably, Andrew was adamant that there must be an heir. Charles was born a few years after Caroline and, as predicted, another young woman gave her life in the pursuit of Andrew Bingley's ambition.

Having spent nearly all of his adult life kowtowing to the gentry who owned the land of Yorkshire in an attempt to buy the best wool at the lowest prices, Andrew knew that neither he nor his son would ever be accepted into their society. Both had worked for the massive Bingley fortune and were well known manufacturers, especially to the Earls of Bradford and Scarborough. Any attempt to make an appearance as a gentleman would be quickly rebuked.

But, as long as Andrew ensured that they never lifted a finger in his mills, his grandchild could make the Bingley debut into the *ton*. So, the Bingley patriarch found a beautiful townhouse in Belgravia owned by a spendthrift Marques who required immediate funds and therefore did not care that the buyers were from trade. The house was close enough to Mayfair to stretch the truth in conversation and, most importantly, it was far from any of the Yorkshire gentry who may make the connection between the young personable Charles Bingley and his shrewd grandfather. Once all of the daily operations of the mill were transferred to a competent steward, Andrew packed up his three motherless grandchildren, hired a buxom governess, and moved to London. Richard was devastated at the loss of first his wife and then his children but found himself unable to oppose his father after a lifetime of obeying without comment. He continued to live and work in the Yorkshire mills until he died in a wool fire when Charles was but 7 years-old. Once again, everything passed on to the young Bingley heir with Andrew acting as trustee until Charles came of age.

After moving the siblings to London, Andrew recognized that Caroline was the only one of his grandchildren with the personality to ensure the continued rise of the Bingley name. He began instructing her on how to keep Charles and Louisa in line the same way Andrew had managed Richard. She was educated on the full plan her grandfather had devised all those years ago when he married the mill owner's daughter. Some of Caroline's earliest and fondest memories were of sitting on her grandfather's lap as he told her how to climb the English socioeconomic ladder. Upon his deathbed, Andrew handed his personal journal to Caroline which included the details of every advantageous opportunity he had ever created for his family. The continuation of the Bingley family social rise passed to Caroline at the tender age of 14.

Up until last year, Caroline had been extremely successful. Louisa's marriage to Mr. Reginald Hurst had been easy to arrange. The Hurst estate is a long standing property on the edge of Kent near Tonbridge and includes a seaside house in Brighton as well as a comfortable house in town. The Hursts are one of the oldest families of the *ton* and

Reginald's maternal Great-Aunt is Lady Sefton, the most prominent and oldest Patroness of Almack's. Where the Bingley money needed ratification through a longstanding connection to land, the Hurst's land needed money. Louisa's dowry of £20,000 paid off the family's debts and allowed improvements to the tenant farms which brought the estate's income back to a respectable £3,000 per annum. As the second son, Reginald Hurst would not inherit, but as part of the consideration for Louisa's marriage, the Hurst's gave Reginald title to the house in London and enough of an annual allowance to keep up with the *ton*. Reginald's older brother's has also promised him £5,000 for Louisa's eventual widow's allowance. Of course, Charles still provides a sizable allowance in the form of food and travel expenses for his sister and her husband, but it is all in the name of advancement.

Louisa and Reginald's marriage provided the Bingley siblings a firm footing into London society. Married at 16, Louisa was granted access to the events of the *ton* before Caroline was even officially out. Mrs. Hurst gave Caroline and Charles legitimacy. With Hurst's sponsorship, Charles was allowed to attend Eton then Cambridge as the brother of a gentlemen. He was allowed to reside in the gentlemen's dorms instead of being relegated to the smaller accommodations usually reserved for the sons of tradesmen. Caroline made her introduction in Louisa's drawing room and in the company of the elder Mrs. Hurst. Always watching the illustrious persons who would file in during morning tea, Caroline remembered the lessons of her beloved grandfather Andrew and identified the people who would be easy to manipulate for her purposes.

Even with all of her careful planning, Caroline was no closer to catching a husband of wealth by the end of her fifth season than she had been at her debut. Two and twenty did not yet make a spinster, but it was becoming clear that catching a man with more than a modest estate who needed her dowry to pay his debts would be difficult. Not to mention that she had turned down 7 such proposals already, earning her a reputation for refusing moderately wealthy gentlemen. It was unlikely that another similar proposal would be forthcoming. Caroline would have even joyously welcomed an impoverished Lord in need of her dowry as long as there wasn't already an heir for the title. But for all the influence of the Hurst name, Bingley was still a newcomer to Town and Caroline was having trouble orchestrating an entrance into the highest echelons where she could catch the eye of any peers or the super-rich. Caroline might have been annoyed by her stalled progress, but she wasn't deterred by the rejections of *le bon ton*. She was Andrew Bingley's true heir and

Caroline was going to make it to the top by hook or by crook.

Then Caroline was introduced to Mr. Fitzwilliam George James Darcy by none other than her dimwitted puppy dog of a brother. Charles catching Darcy was an unimaginable boon to Caroline. The friendship had grown naturally and totally without Caroline's manipulation, but no matter, even a broken clock is right twice a day. Darcy had first sailed into the Bingley townhouse the summer after Charles started at Cambridge. Caroline had, of course, heard of the wealth of Pemberley, but since the elder Mr. Darcy was still alive and in no need of an heir, Caroline had initially disregarded both Darcy men as marital prospects. She was not interested in playing second fiddle to her husband's father or living off of an allowance until the old man's death. Therefore, all of the men Caroline had originally pursued were already in full possession of their inheritance. That first summer, Caroline was content to allow the "boys" to hide in the game room and saved her best dresses for calling on the wealthy widows with sons to marry off.

Though she was ignoring Darcy as a prospect for marriage, Caroline wasn't blind. She never failed to notice the superior quality of Mr. Darcy's clothing, the pleasing picture he presented wearing them. She also admired his cool and aloof demeanor, which bespoke of breeding of the highest level. Upon her first invitation to dinner at the Darcy townhouse, which is decidedly ensconced in the Mayfair neighborhood without any need for embellishment, she also noted the apparent wealth of the Darcy family. Most of the gossips of London's high society mumbled behind their fans that the Darcy estate garnered £10,000 per annum, but Caroline was sure it was closer to twice that amount. Perhaps the current Mr. Darcy's great-grandfather had earned £10,000 per annum and society never bothered to update their gossip. Few of even the titled peers surpassed the Darcys in wealth or land holdings.

When the elder Mr. Darcy fell ill and died suddenly the following winter, it was as if Caroline had been given a sign. She felt as though her grandfather was once again holding her on his knee and guiding her down the path to social supremacy. For the last five years since young Fitzwilliam Darcy had taken possession of all the Pemberley property and accounts, Caroline has bided her time. She knew that coming into his inheritance at only 23 would be a struggle but suddenly having to raise his 11 year old sister made the job nearly impossible. Caroline guided Charles into making sure the Bingley's were issued regular invitations to Pemberley and always provided support for the grieving Darcy siblings.

As a young, handsome, and massively rich bachelor, Darcy was pursued incessantly by the match-making mommas of the *ton*. He was so often imposed upon by mercenary ladies that Darcy never appeared in society without either his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, or Charles for protection. And where Charles goes, so goes Caroline. Frequently arriving at a high society event on the arm of the most eligible bachelor in London has catapulted Caroline to the top. She isn't naive enough to believe that any of her recently acquired lady friends have any interest in her as a person, but understands that each looks on strictly in jealousy and with the hope that she will falter at some point. They will be waiting until the end of time, Caroline does not make mistakes. At the end of this last season there had been twittering about Caroline deluding herself with visions of becoming Mrs. Darcy. Why would he need 5 years to make his offer if one was forthcoming? Many of the younger ladies believed that they could supplant the 27 year old. She will show them exactly how deluded she has become.

Waiting for so long had started to take a toll on Caroline but she has always comforted in knowing that Darcy never showed the least bit of interest in any female acquaintance either in town or around his home in Derbyshire. Additionally she was not keen to provide Darcy with the required heir too soon having lost both her mother and grandmother to childbirth. Waiting a few extra years before taking on her marital duty was of no significance. Caroline was confident in her position as Darcy's best friend's sister and felt as if her influence over Georgiana was coming along quite nicely. When the day came, Caroline was sure that becoming Mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House London would be worth the wait.

If only she hadn't insisted her brother take on that dreadful estate in Hertfordshire. Netherfield was a plague. Its furnishings had been dreadfully out of date and the surrounding community was utterly devoid of quality company. Caroline was glad that she had waited to arrange the invitations for the fall hunting party she had hoped to host until seeing the state of the property. She would have been a laughing stock if she had brought any of the upper set to that backwards little town and provided them with such outdated accommodations.

Then Jane and Eliza Bennet had nearly destroyed all of Caroline's hard work. Her brother was meant for the daughter of a peer and Caroline was going to be Mistress of Pemberley. That chit, with her fine eyes and unkempt curls, would never take Caroline's prize.

The only saving grace from their stay at Netherfield was the discovery

of a very chatty housekeeper. Grandfather Andrew had always emphasized the use of servants in getting information and doing the dirty work. Often times those below stairs knew more about the lives of the gentry than they knew of themselves. In each of the London houses as well as the house in Brighton, Caroline had gained a valuable informant through the high level staff. Of course she preferred to use only the highest, but when the original housekeeper of the Hurst townhouse was less than forthcoming, Caroline had to devise another way to get what she wanted.

Since Louisa was technically mistress of Hurst's house, the elderly housekeeper wouldn't take direction from the mistress's young sister. Initially frustrated, Caroline soon found an ally in the former Mrs. Hurst's abigail. Mrs. Kelley felt she had been passed over for the rightful promotion to housekeeper in favor of the former housekeeper's sister. To add insult to injury, after her mistress passed, Mrs. Kelley was relegated to the ranks of the public room maids instead of being given a position in the family wing.

By promising Mrs. Kelley the housekeeper's position if her plan was successful, Caroline enlisted Mrs. Kelley to plant evidence that the elderly housekeeper had stolen household funds. In the end, the stubborn old woman had lived by her principles but she was dismissed without reference all the same.

Now the volume and quality of information that flows to Caroline through the Hurst townhouse is without equal.

The chatty housekeeper at Netherfield, Mrs. Smythe, has already proven to be nearly as valuable with the information she has procured regarding the Bennets. It was through Mrs. Smythe that Caroline first learned Miss Lydia had traveled to Brighton alone in the care of Colonel Forster and his young, irresponsible wife. It was too easy. Upon applying to the housekeeper of the Hurst's home in that seaside resort, Caroline had received news of Miss Lydia's inappropriate flirtations and attention to none other than Lt. George Wickham. This letter had been received back in July before starting her northern summer tour with Charles and the Hursts. No other information had yet caught up with Caroline, but her intuition was high. She would bet all of her future fortune that whatever family crisis pulled Eliza suddenly from Pemberley in August was the result of Miss Lydia's misbehaviour in Brighton.

Caroline had planned to bring up the topic at dinner on the night Eliza and her Cheapside relatives were invited to dine at Pemberley.

Fortunately, they had all scurried back to Longbourn and sent Georgiana their regrets before the travesty of a meal could take place. Then, as if sharing Darcy's attention with Eliza during her triumphant visit to Pemberley hadn't been bad enough, Darcy received an urgent missive recalling him immediately to London and cutting their visit to a mere 3 days. And Caroline still had no idea what was so urgent that Darcy had abandoned his dearest friends.

How Infuriating!

On each of Caroline's previous trips to Pemberley she had tried to ingratiate herself with Mrs. Reynolds, the devoted and loyal housekeeper of Pemberley. So far nothing has worked. She's tried sickly sweet and lovable; she's tried condescending and authoritative; and finally this time she even tried lying to the woman. Caroline outright told Mrs. Reynolds that she and Mr. Darcy had come to an understanding and so her position would soon be under Caroline's control. It was certainly a risk if Mrs. Reynolds reported the incident to Darcy, but as Caroline truly believed that he was merely waiting to have Georgiana settled before procuring his own marriage, it was a risk she was willing to take. Like a Royal Duchess confident of her position in the world, the old woman stood firm. Mrs. Reynolds informed Caroline that until she heard otherwise from Mr. Darcy directly, Miss Darcy was the mistress of Pemberley. What is even worse, all of the upstairs maids are fiercely loyal to Mrs. Reynolds and Caroline hasn't been able to identify a single disgruntled employee in the entire massive house. The woman will be singing a decidedly different tune once Caroline takes her rightful place as Mrs. Darcy. Perhaps she can send the old bat to Netherfield and bring the ever chatty Mrs. Smythe to Pemberley.

But until that time, Caroline is left without an informant as to Mr. Darcy's activities. She has her suspicions that he must still be in London but she can't be sure. To make matters worse, Charles has remained uncharacteristically tightlipped about the whole affair and refuses to seek out his friend despite her argument that it is unpardonably rude to return to Town and not go calling on ones dearest friends.

This morning the Hursts' housekeeper sent word that one of Louise's callers had mentioned seeing Miss Georgiana Darcy on Bond Street just a few days ago, but the knocker is still vacant from the Darcy's door. Until the door knocker is reattached, the Darcys are not receiving callers. Caroline must be content to daily send invitations to their house for dinner, which continue to go unanswered, or wait until

an invitation is issued before seeing either Darcy.

Or maybe someone with a loose tongue will finally spot the man. It's not like he's hard to identify towering over the *ton* and riding on that great black horse.

As Caroline watched the few strollers out at such an unfashionable hour through her window in the north parlor, she promised herself that this would be the year. She will no longer wait for Darcy to make up his mind. Perhaps she has been too available up until now, prompting Darcy to feel content in her eventual submission. Well, he will have a rude awakening, Caroline will not be taken for granted!

She will promote her match with Charles, Reginald, Georgiana, and anyone else who will listen. With luck, the expectation created by the gossip she plans to spread will finally prompt Darcy to act. He wouldn't want his reputation as a gentleman to falter by jilting his best friend's sister. And if social persuasion isn't enough, Caroline will just have to orchestrate another solution next summer at Pemberley.

The season ends officially on the last Friday of June.

Most of the best families take their leave of Town by mid-June and spend the last few weeks of socializing at the country homes of their friends before tucking into their own estates for the fall and winter. While Almack's and Vauxhall Gardens provide a pretty background for flirtations, most serious proposals are conducted in the more private setting of the end of season house parties or a private ball. Any debuting lady would be the envy of the entire season if she could manage to procure prestigious acceptances to an end of the season house party. Convincing Charles to introduce the idea of hosting a small end of season house party at Pemberley to Darcy in honor of Georgiana's debut would be simple. Helping the young miss with the formal invitations would, of course, be Caroline's greatest honor as a devoted friend. She will also ensure that several important and influential people in Darcy's life receive honored invitations.

Oh yes, Caroline will be Mrs. Darcy by the end of this next season, you can be sure of that.

Her first role as mistress will be to rid the South Garden of the wild and unruly rosebushes she had observed being pruned on her last trip to her future home. Roses are far too common to be grown in such abundance and in so prominent a location. Perhaps something more exotic, like the lily plants that were displayed at Vauxhall last Easter.

It would be preferable if she could have them all removed before the house party. Perhaps once she finally gets an audience with Georgiana she will mention the matter.

Just as Caroline was finishing the dregs of her tea, the Bingley's housekeeper, Mrs. Compton, knocked bearing a fresh cup and the post. There was quite a lot of mail today having just received a large bundle from the Bingley's Yorkshire residence. All of the aborted travel plans this summer had made it difficult for Caroline's servants to keep up with the family. Just after they would leave one location the post would arrive and need to be passed on again. Several letters were dated August! Heavens it has been an exhausting 6 weeks. Upon leaving for Town, Caroline had instructed the staff to hold all post until the day they were originally scheduled to leave and send only the one large package express.

Now she has everything at once and can attend to the matter efficiently.

Looking over the stack, she sees several letters from the Brighton house and nearly a dozen from Netherfield. This should be a good morning ...

Chapter 3: The End of Docility

Chapter Summary

Colonel Fitzwilliam decides to act.

Rosings Park, Kent

22 September 1812

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was furious.

For nearly all of their shared existence, Richard has been unfailingly loyal to Darcy. As close as brothers but with more tolerance, Richard has followed Darcy wherever he wanted to go. After Lady Anne Darcy passed shortly after Georgiana's birth, Richard consciously decided to take the part of the second even though he is 2 years Darcys senior. Since that day nearly 17 years ago, Richard's relationship with Darcy could only be described as docile. Many of his cadets would have a hard time believing that the demanding Colonel would ever treat anyone with kid gloves, but this has always been their way. No More! The next time they were in the same room, Darcy was finally going to meet one of the most decorated officers in His Majesty's Army.

In the past fortnight he had sent his cousin a multitude of letters thinking him to be at Pemberley. Darcy's lack of response had been unusual, but Richard overlooked the insult due to the fact that Darcy's last letter, dated 6 August, had included mention of a certain fine eyed gentlewomen with enough wit to keep his fastidious cousin in check visiting Pemberley. At the time, Richard had chuckled at Darcy's tone when describing their first meeting behind the stables in the south rose garden. It was clear Darcy wished to make it seem as if he was merely pleasantly surprised to see an old acquaintance enjoying the grounds of his home, but Richard knew better. Darcy was a man violently in love with the most enchanting woman ever to make his acquaintance. Unfortunately, he had waited so long to declare himself that he might have just lost her forever.

Foolish Selfish Twat!

Apparently Richard's correspondence was not the only duty Darcy had been ignoring over the last fortnight. In fact, upon responding to a

summons by Lady Catherine, Richard was shocked to learn that Darcy had not returned one letter to either their aunt or cousin Anne. Her ladyship's purpose in sending for Richard was clearly to berate Darcy and enlist the good Colonel's assistance in bringing him to Kent. Lady Catherine feels like Darcy and Anne's wedding can be put off no longer as five years was more than adequate time for the young master to learn his duties to Pemberley. If Anne must endure another season with the tittering gossips of the *ton* questioning the nature of her engagement, it may permanently damage her reputation. Additionally, Georgiana's debut was to be in the spring and she would need Anne comfortably installed as Mrs. Darcy before the start of the season to act as chaperone at Almack's. Never mind that Anne has never had her own London season or danced all night at Almack's, but Lady Catherine will see the world from her own overly ornate perch in Kent and disregard the rest.

All of this was old news. Lady Catherine has made the same demands of both Richard and Darcy every fall for the last 4 years and Richard has always bit his tongue in order to allow Darcy to handle their aunt's expectations. Each year is another year that Anne can no longer endure the London gossips without completely ruining her reputation. Each spring is one where Georgiana finds herself in dire need of Anne's influence as Mrs. Darcy to guide her through the upcoming stage in the life of a young woman. Always the same though somehow different.

In reality, Anne's reputation is in no danger from a public jilting due to the simple fact that she has no reputation of which to speak. Lady Catherine ensured that her daughter would have no negative gossip brandied about her throughout the sitting rooms of the *ton* when she started living as a hermit in Kent. Of course, while she has protected Anne from any negative gossip, she has also ensured that no one talks of Anne at all, good or bad. In the London social ladder, if you aren't seen or heard from regularly, you don't exist. Many of the older set remember Lady Catherine from her society days and recall that she had a child, but few outside the immediate Fitzwilliam family could reliably say whether the child was male or female. Additionally, since neither Lady Catherine nor Anne ever venture to London or correspond with anyone outside of our immediate family, no one in society is even aware of the supposed engagement. Every now and again a discrete inquiry will be directed towards Richard's father, Lord Matlock, asking after the marriageability of the de Bourgh heir, but sadly he has been instructed by the stubborn Lady to turn away each suitor.

Richard mused that Anne is in more danger of dying of boredom than of being publically mocked for Darcy's eventual refusal to marry her. Anne knows that Darcy will never marry her and if Lady Catherine would ever stop to listen to her daughter she might just hear that Anne has no desire to marry Darcy. While she has a familial respect for their serious cousin, Anne really does not like Darcy all that much. His prickly personality and dour moods often provoke her ire. Anne has never had the constitution to look for the humor in life or tease with ease. In truth, the two are much too alike to ever coexist happily. Each needs someone with a lively personality to balance out their seriousness.

Even as a child Darcy always greatly annoyed Anne greatly. Though Anne was never truly stout, she preferred to run outside and play as children do while Darcy's proclivity for hiding in the library started quite young. He was forever trying to teach her something about a long dead military leader who undoubtedly killed hundreds of men with his bare hands while holding back the tide. Even as a second son destined for the army, Richard found it difficult to muster any enthusiasm for Darcy's dedication to military history. Anyone who would take the time to observe Anne during visits from her cousins could see that Miss Anne de Bourgh greatly prefers the lively personality of Cousin Richard over the dour Mr. Darcy.

Richard shook his head. If only Lady Catherine would give up her ridiculous delusions of marrying Anne to Darcy and let the poor girl live in peace. Sir Lewis de Bourgh named Richard's father as Anne's guardian and trustee of Rosings upon his death. Lord Matlock has always let Lady Catherine maintain her position as Mistress of Rosings and parent to Anne, providing only the required legal intervention to release the widow's settlement and Anne inheritance. Perhaps it is time Richard spoke up to his father about the treatment of their frail cousin.

Now that we have dispensed with the old news, it is time to turn to the NEW news that Richard was given shortly after his arrival to Rosings. The decidedly most disturbing new news.

Richard arrived at Rosings yesterday in time for tea and learned that Lady Catherine had invited the Hunsford vicar and his wife to join their dinner party. Richard was then taken by surprise when, instead of the sycophantic Mr. Collins and his exceptionally sweet tempered wife, Richard was introduced to a new ridiculous man with a much less intelligent wife. After a respectable time for small talk and compliments to his person, Richard asked after the former inhabitants

of the parsonage. The tale of the Bennet family's woe spewed forth from Lady Catherine with such venom that you would think her own daughter had been the one to fall. Additionally, the level of detail recalled was of such great depth one would think she was presenting her senior dissertation before the Cambridge board of regents instead of spreading gossip. Mr. Collins was no doubt sending regular updates to her ladyship and all informed had been dismayed to recently confirm that the "*little tart*" (Lady Catherine's words) was with child.

Wickham's Bastard Child.

Richard paced the floor of his spacious chamber. He hadn't even changed into his night clothes last night but instead choose to progress through a decanter of so-so brandy. Now the sun was cresting over the woods surrounding the park while he continued to drink. True to Darcy's prediction, Richard raised his glass in silent celebration for Wickham's demise then hung his head for all the pain that had been inflicted on the poor Bennet family.

Unaware of his cousin's complete history with Elizabeth Bennet, specifically unaware of the proposal and subsequent refusal in Hunsford last April, Richard cursed Darcy for failing to act earlier. Why had Darcy stilled Richard's sword after Ramsgate? Why had he allowed Wickham free reign after discovering him in Meryton? Why, oh why did he wait so long to secure Miss Elizabeth's hand?!?!

No More! Richard had disagreed with many of Darcy's recent decisions but demurred due to the long standing nature of their relationship. He had allowed Darcy to come to his own conclusions, trusting that his stalwart cousin knew what was best for himself and Georgie. Starting as soon as he could bully his way into the Darcy House's master study Richard was going to give Fitzwilliam Darcy a piece of his mind! Marriage to the tainted Elizabeth Bennet was likely no longer an option, but there must be something the Darcys and Fitzwilliams could do for her and her family. Perhaps helping the oldest two find positions with a respectable society family in order to lessen her family's financial stress. If Lady Catherine's information was to be believed, there was no more than £5,000 to sustain six grown women and now potentially a baby. And that baby, what is to be done with it? With no father, grandfather, or uncle to take responsibility for him or her, it would be difficult for the Bennets to keep it.

Richard resolved to leave Rosings as soon as he had enough coffee to counteract the brandy. He would also practice exerting himself with his difficult relations. After speaking with Anne over breakfast,

Richard would tell Lady Catherine, in no uncertain terms, that he was not going to do her bidding where Darcy is concerned. From now on, Lady Catherine will have to carry her point with the man himself. Then, Richard plans to make haste to Darcy House in London.

He had a bone to pick with his cousin!

Chapter 4: Hidden Strength

Chapter Summary

Charles Bingley is not exactly as he seems.

Wilton Row, Belgravia, London

22 September 1812

Charles stood silently looking out the window of the master's study in his London townhouse. Many of their shared acquaintances would recognize the pose as one his good friend Darcy often took when contemplating a problem or attempting to escape an uncomfortable social situation. But only Charles's loyal valet, Grayson, has ever seen the outwardly congenial man take such a position.

The happy demeanor Charles presented to the world wasn't a total farce. He was naturally easy going and engaging. Never admitting to possessing a firmly held opinion was also easy as he truthfully did not have many firm opinions on the frivolous things Caroline constantly fretted about. But the weak façade was a coping mechanism developed long ago in order to deal with his sister's machinations. Caroline truly believes that she is the only Bingley sibling with any intelligence or ambition but she is soon to be sorely disappointed. In truth, Charles was exceptionally intelligent, just like his grandfather, but had enough compassion to realize the cruelty in the elderly man.

Charles had listened to their grandfather Andrew as often as Caroline. Though he was younger, he easily contemplated the lessons imparted by the social climber and had a very different reaction from his selfish sister. The young boy had loved his father very much and always felt angry at the way Grandfather seemed to think poorly of the affectionate man. After learning of their father's tragic death, young Charles went into the Library to cry alone. Shortly after he had quieted, Caroline and Grandfather entered the room without knowing Charles was hidden behind the sofa. They began to speak poorly of their departed father and son. His anger soon turned into fear as they began to discuss himself. Grandfather and Caroline agreed that they would have to keep Charles in line now that he was the legal owner of all the Bingley family's wealth. Andrew Bingley still controlled the minuscule amount of cash he had amassed through his salary as a

foreman in the wool mill, but all of the property and profits associated with the mill and the cloth manufacturing business had technically been owned by Richard, and now Charles. His relations spoke at length how the young master must be controlled and guided to make the most advantageous decisions. At only 7 years of age, Charles vowed never to trust his grandfather or sister again and always keep himself informed of their schemes.

Since Charles was often a boisterous child, when he decided to hold his tongue he would be overlooked. Charles could quietly enter the library while Grandfather was instructing Caroline to sit in the large wingback chair and listen undetected. Many of Grandfather's lessons were practical and could be employed without the other man's cruelty. Indeed, servants often knew more of what was going on around the gentry than the master of the house. Loyalty and candid communication from ones servants could produce much valuable information. Unfortunately, Caroline insisted that, as the Mistress of the house, she must hire all of the servants. Thankfully she had never challenged Charles on his choice of valet. Grayson was recommended to Charles during his second year at Cambridge by Darcy and is the son of the Darcy house stable master. Caroline would never dare go against a recommendation by Darcy even if she didn't particularly like that she was unable to influence Charles's man. Shortly after taking on Grayson, the two men had a candid discussion about the state of Charles's house. Both agreed that they should never trust any of the other servants with sensitive information. Grayson took on a silent demeanor, only speaking to the others in the house to request necessities for his master.

In a stroke of genius, Grayson recommended that Charles confide in Mrs. Reynolds, the elderly housekeeper at Pemberley. Mrs. Reynolds is Grayson's paternal aunt and has formed the foundation for all of the Darcy family's trust in their devoted servants for many years. A responsibility her grandmother shouldered before her. Of course, the fact that the Darcys are generous and kind masters only helps reinforce the expectation of absolute discretion. Caroline will have a very rude awakening indeed when she finds herself no longer in a position to terrorize their servants. So, during his very first trip to Pemberley, Charles spoke with Mrs. Reynolds. He confided that his own house was populated with his sister's informants and Caroline's sole goal in life was to climb the social ladder as high as it reaches. Mrs. Reynolds promised the young man that he could always contact her through Grayson with sensitive requirements and needs. After Caroline's interest in Darcy became apparent, they decided to hide their communication inside letters to Grayson from one of the

downstairs Pemberley maids. Caroline might have opened letters from the Pemberley housekeeper hoping to learn information about the Darcy siblings' movements, but she would completely ignore letters from a low ranking maid.

In fact Caroline's belief that only the highest of female servants could be of any real use was one of her largest mistakes. She believed that men were generally clueless to the real value of gossip and would miss those details that were truly important. Charles found that the stable boys were just as knowledgeable as the housekeeper and often more likely to move about undetected. With more help from Darcy, Charles was able to get several Pemberley stable boys instilled at both the Bingley and Hurst townhouses. All of the boys were housed together for convenience in a structure Charles had built, supposedly on another of Darcy's recommendations, above the stables attached to the Hurst's residence. Naturally they would share talk amongst themselves after retiring from their duties. Only one young man was involved in the information being passed back to Charles. As another relation of Grayson and Mrs. Reynolds, Charles was assured of his discretion and continued to protect any of the other servants from Caroline's wrath.

This morning Charles had received a multitude of letters from his small but valuable network. Like Caroline, his correspondence was interrupted by all the last minute changes to their travel plans. In addition to the routine information regarding his house and holdings, Charles had received two letters of significant importance.

The first was from Mrs. Reynolds. That Caroline has been trying to engage her in passing information regarding the Darcys for several years was not surprising to Charles but her behaviour during their latest visit is worrying. Caroline had blatantly lied to Mrs. Reynolds about her relationship with Darcy in order to try and force the housekeeper's cooperation. This escalation in his sister's behaviour gave Charles significant pause. He had known of his sister's intentions towards Darcy the moment he told her that the elder Mr. Darcy had died.

It was a disturbing memory.

They had all been sitting in the Bingley's drawing room after dinner during one of Charles's school breaks. Darcy had graduated the previous spring and planned to spend the harvest at Pemberley learning from his father before starting his grand tour after the New Year. Darcy never left for France. After his father's death, Darcy avoided London society and spent eight months continuously at

Pemberley trying to manage the estate. His uncle, Henri Fitzwilliam, the Earl of Matlock, had offered much help with the business of running such a grand estate. Darcy's cousin Richard, only a Major at the time, took as much leave as he could in order to attend to the emotional health of both of his devastated cousins, but when he was forced to return to the Peninsular war, Charles had been invited to Derbyshire.

Opening the express in full company, Charles was unable to keep both the sad information and the invitation from his sister. As he spoke, Caroline's expression turned menacing before she was able to school her features into one of sympathy. All summer while Charles and Darcy were enjoying the pursuits of young men, Caroline had ignored his friend. She was not blind to his attractions or wealth but considered him a poor candidate for marriage. With another unsuccessful season and a building reputation as a mercenary harpy, Caroline was feeling the stress of making her match.

Darcy's sudden assentation to the throne of Pemberley changed all of her plans in one look. She suddenly put every effort into marrying Fitzwilliam Darcy. Charles had tried to protect his friend as best he could, but hadn't made any overt steps to control Caroline for fear of her retaliation. Now he only hopes he will be able to salvage the situation once whatever she is concocting comes to a head. Long ago Darcy told Charles that he would never marry Caroline regardless of the situation, but pressure from the Hurst or Lord Matlock might change Darcy's tune if she forces the matter. With Georgiana coming out in the spring, Darcy wouldn't want to damage his sister with a scandal of Caroline's making.

The second important letter was unexpected and heartbreaking. The steward of Netherfield had sent him updates on the harvest along with news of the Bennets. His newest servant was a competent estate manager and another recommendation from Darcy. The man was also a keen observer and had immediately seen Charles's interest in the angelic Miss Jane Bennet. He rarely sent information not related to the Netherfield holdings, but each time he had, it was only one line and never failed to break Charles's spirit.

The first was last February; "*Miss Jane Bennet is visiting relatives in Cheapside, London for the spring.*" At first he believed that her decision not to call on the Bingleys during her stay in London was further proof of Darcy's contention that she did not care for him and so he stayed away. Later, after much thought, he wondered if she had ignored him. It would be improper for her to call on a single man, so if she had

visited she would have called on Caroline or Louisa. His manipulative sister would have never reported the visit to Charles. Also, if the servants were unaware of Jane's importance to the master, her visit would have garnered little attention below stairs. Grayson may have never heard of the visit either.

The second such note about the Bennets was received on his last day at Pemberley in August and read simply; *"Miss Lydia has eloped with an officer from Brighton and Miss Jane Bennet is distraught."* It arrived express but was originally delivered to the Pemberley stables and then passed on to Grayson. The seal seemed intact when he opened the missive and Charles committed it to the fire the moment he had understood the content so he had hope that no one had intercepted the note. Darcy would not say what caused Miss Elizabeth and the Gardiners to leave for Longbourn so quickly, but Charles was sure that they had received the same news.

Intent on keeping the intelligence from Caroline for as long as possible, Charles had feigned indifference to the change in plans and continued on with their summer plans. With any hope, Jane's father and uncles would be able to remedy the situation before too much scandal could be created. Charles had also asked Mrs. Reynolds to hold any post that came to Pemberley after their departure until Grayson sent word that they had departed for London. Charles's goal was to delay letters from that horrible gossiping housekeeper at Netherfield who would think the Bingleys at Pemberley until late September. Unfortunately that meant he only just received the third note from his steward.

"Mr. Bennet killed the officer in a duel but has passed of his own injuries and the Bennet women have been turned out of Longbourn, Miss Jane and Miss Elizabeth go to London."

His beautiful Jane was orphaned and living off of the charity of the lovely Gardiners. Miss Lydia was never married to a dead man and the Bennet women have lost all standing in society. Cheapside, she now lives in Cheapside. If only that were the end but the final missive arrived today independently of the bundle from Yorkshire. *"Miss Lydia is with Child."*

As Charles was staring at that last sentence, Grayson knocked and entered with a tray for breakfast. The faithful valet had confirmed that Miss Bingley received a large bundle of correspondence this morning which included an unusual number of letters from the senior staff at the other Bingley and Hurst residences.

She knows.

It's certain, Caroline knows of the Bennet family's fall from grace. Whatever will save them now?

Charles had relived every second with his beloved Jane and knew in his heart that Darcy was wrong. Elizabeth's words during their brief time together at Pemberley only confirmed his conviction. If Charles was ever going to win Jane's heart he would have to act very carefully. He had always known that Caroline wanted him to marry into the aristocracy, but he was determined to be happy. Jane made him happy. What good was standing within the *ton* if it came with misery?

Tradesmen like Edward Gardiner had a comfortable living and friendly society amongst the other professionals in the merchant class. In contrast, many of the landed gentry were finding it hard to keep their coffers full with just the profits born of crops and sheep. When the over inflated grain prices dropped after Napoleon's vanquish they would find themselves in even worse shape. Charles had been divesting his holdings in order to continue to earn profit. Caroline never paid any attention to the business end of their wealth, as long as her allowance was substantial. Both the wool mill and his mother's cloth manufacturing business continued to make a profit every year. Charles took all of that profit and invested it in non-agricultural industries. Coal had been doing particularly well in the last 3 years.

With all of his dirty trade money he planned to buy an estate far away from London and forget the barbs of the *ton*. Darcy had been helping him look at properties near Derby for a few years and there was one just north of Belper that was perfect. Once he figured out how, Charles would sweep Jane away from all of the turmoil caused by the gossiping harpies in London and live blissfully in Derbyshire. If his instincts were good, perhaps she wouldn't even be too far from her favorite sister.

It was time to act. Charles would go to Darcy house immediately, before the storm erupted in his own home. Darcy had sent word through Grayson that he had been in London for the entire 6 weeks since leaving Pemberley and the butler would admit Charles through the back stables. The knocker was off the door and Darcy didn't want anyone else to come calling if they saw Charles admitted through the front door. With any luck he would catch his good friend before having to return for dinner. Together they could determine how to save the Bennet sisters. He would keep his ultimate goal to himself for

now, but hopefully the answer to separating himself from Caroline would present itself soon. If only he could be sure that Darcy wouldn't actually cave to the social pressure resulting from a compromising situation and marry his damned sister. Her demise at her own hand would be poetic.

Chapter 5: Discovery of Spirit

Chapter Summary

Georgiana has her eyes opened and makes a decision.

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

22 September 1812

Georgiana sat at the piano in the Darcy townhouse music room, but no music flowed forth from the grand instrument. She had come to practice after breakfast and barley made it through a single piece. William had galloped away before dawn while Georgiana watched from her bedroom window seat.

Something changed between the Darcy siblings last night. During William's recounting of his failed romance with Miss Elizabeth, Georgiana realized that despite all his outward strength, William was lost. He had taken on the responsibility of Pemberley at only 23 without any parent figure to guide him into adulthood. A man of 23 may legally be considered an adult but there is so much left to learn. Uncle Henri was always a great advisor on matters of estate management, but William never confided in the formidable Lord Matlock about matters of the heart. Cousin Richard was willing, but his career had kept him away much of the time. Lady Catherine's solution was to bully him into a marriage that would only cause pain to both participants and Georgiana herself was but a child who needed a strong father figure. She was not mature enough to provide any true support to her dear brother. So it seems William had begun to rely on himself.

They had all been blind.

Pemberley was flourishing so there was no reason to question William's adjustment to his role as Master. He always seemed confident and never wavered when making a decision. Even his friends trusted his judgment, often above their own. Charles Bingley had obviously decided against his own heart in favor of William's mind. There was no one in William's life who questioned him.

Miss Elizabeth had questioned him. She had teased him and never

deferred to his opinions. They had conversations about topics that were stimulating to his intellect. She laughed at her own folly. She had given him the one thing in his life that he could not buy. No wonder he was desperately in love.

Last year had been nothing but a nightmare. Georgiana's sheltered life came to an abrupt end when the silver tongued snake had taught her a lesson in British Society. George Wickham had always been a part of Georgiana's life. Her father had loved the young man and intended to leave him a valuable living. As a child, George would spend time in the library with the elder Mr. Darcy or playing with William out in the woods. Sometime after George and William went to Cambridge their friendly relationship had cooled, but William never confided in her about the reason for their falling-out.

Every year Georgiana would wait impatiently all spring for her brother to come home from school. When the blooms on her mother's rose bushes began to appear in late April or early May she knew her wait was almost over. On the day William would come home for the summer, he would ask Cook to pack a basket then take Georgiana on a picnic in the rose garden. He would listen to all of her childhood activities since Christmas in rapt attention. She always felt so important when he listened. At 9, Georgiana had spent many hours counting the number of buds on the bushes and writing him letters filled with the updated count. He never once tired of her silliness and returned each letter with his anticipation of a beautiful and fragrant summer.

It was their special place, the south rose garden.

Lady Anne Darcy had come to Pemberley as a new bride with little knowledge of her husband or his estate. Georgiana's grandfather had been great friends with the previous Lord Matlock and they had contracted for the marriage when Anne was only 13. Though it was a financial arrangement, both fathers truly believed that their children would be well suited and wished to spare them the falseness of the London marriage market. George Darcy and Henri Fitzwilliam were also the best of friends and knew the alliance would strengthen both of their families. One month after her 18th birthday, Lady Anne came to Pemberley for the first time as its new Mistress.

George wanted his beautiful young bride to feel comfortable with her new home, so he asked Henri after his sister's favorite pastime. He confided that Lady Anne could often be found amongst the roses in a secluded garden at the edge of Matlock Park. Henri and Anne's

grandmother had first planted the roses when she was a new bride and tended the bushes herself. Once Anne was old enough to toddle the distance between the house and the garden, she had accompanied their grandmother on many sunny days to read or paint amongst the blooms. After the elderly Dowager passed, Anne continued to care for the roses.

As soon as the weather would allow, George contacted the Matlock Park head gardener and asked for him to transplant one of the rose bushes to Pemberley. He presented Lady Anne with the precious plant and a newly tilled section of the formal gardens visible from the master's study and the library. He told her that he wanted to be able to look out the window and see the most beautiful creatures in all of god's creation enjoying the sunshine together.

George Darcy and Lady Anne Fitzwilliam may have had an arranged marriage, but they truly loved each other.

Over the years, Lady Anne's roses flourished in the sunny plot to the south of the stables. Only 5 years after the original planting, the plot had become too small. Instead of letting any of his wife's plants get cut back, George had another section of the garden cleared. This pattern has been repeated every few years and now the garden encompasses a large area of the formal gardens.

Even though Georgiana never knew her mother, she has always felt close to her while sitting in her garden. During their precious summers, William would take her down to the roses and tell stories about their mother. They would play games that she would make up, weaving through the concentric rings, or reading from her favorite books. Their father would sometimes come out of his study upon spying his children from the window to join in their play or bring sweets and lemonade. The roses were special.

The summer after William graduated University, he had come home for only one week before going back to London. Their father insisted he participate in at least some of the season now that he was finished with his education. Even though his own happy marriage had been arranged specifically so he wouldn't have to endure a London Season, George thought the forced social activity would be good for his shy son. Additionally, as George had yet to identify a similarly well suited match for his son as his father had found for him, spending some time getting to know the eligible ladies could only help William. Georgiana knew he dreaded going but she couldn't fathom why. At 11, London seemed a sea of magical entertainments. Oh! To dance with finely

dressed gentlemen and attend the theater. Georgiana had started reading Shakespeare and dreamed of seeing Romeo dance with Juliet on the stage in Covent Garden. Though apprehensive, William was a dutiful child and did as their father bid.

Without her summer playmate, Georgiana was feeling lonely before the first of the roses were wilted. George Wickham had come home and suddenly all Georgiana's thoughts were of dancing with the handsome young man. She tailed George everywhere and tried to get him to play her silly games. Naïveté blinded her to the annoyance in his eyes and she kept up her attempts to catch his attention all summer. She was never successful and then William came home near the end of June. With her constant companion returned, Georgiana forgot all about George Wickham. She did notice that George disappeared from Pemberley the day after her father's fatal stroke, but the passing thought was lost to Georgiana's grief.

When a shy 15 year-old Georgiana arrived in Ramsgate, George used that summer against her. He lied through a too sweet smile, telling her that he had always thought she was beautiful but couldn't court the Master's daughter in his house. George said that he had avoided being with her that summer because he realized he was coming to admire and love the little miss but knew that her father would never approve. How stupid could she be! Thinking back it is obvious that he was nothing but a liar. He was saying that, at 22, he believed himself in love with an 11 year-old girl who wore her hair in pigtails. Ridiculous. But she believed, as all children do, that she was mature for her age, already an adult. And George was much too good at the deception. Thank heavens William had showed up before she made the biggest mistake of her life.

At first, William's reaction seemed to reinforce George's declaration that her father, and now her brother, would never approve of their love. The forced separation fuelled Georgiana's anger and she planned to run away from her brother's officiousness. Then her maid let it slip that George had left Ramsgate on his own after learning of the condition upon Georgiana's dowry. Lilian had been listening at the servant's door when William informed George that the elder Mr. Darcy's will had indeed left Georgiana £30,000, but as a trust annuity. The annual interest was approximately £700. Additionally, the specific requirements of the trust stated that the trustee could only release the annual interest in an amount not to exceed to her husband's annual income. A Lieutenant in the militia earned £350 per year and was provided only single male lodgings. The full amount would not become available until Georgiana's 30th birthday.

He had only ever wanted her money.

Later, with gentle guidance from her new companion, Mrs. Annesley, Georgiana had confided in Mrs. Reynolds. It was then that she learned George was more than a mere mercenary, he was a degenerate. William had been paying his gambling debts and digging him out of trouble since they went to University. After her father's death, William had stopped managing George's misdeeds. There was some dispute about the Krypton living mentioned in her father's will, but Mrs. Reynolds believed that William had discharged the bequest and was under no further obligation to George.

The final blow had been the children. The children he had fathered and abandoned. Each had been placed with one of the many Pemberley tenants, but the young mothers had surrendered their futures to the selfish pleasures of a man without any moral compass. Now, even in death, George Wickham was still ruining the lives of young, impressionable women. Poor Miss Lydia. What will she do now? Who will raise her babe? How unimaginable to carry a child and then let some other woman provide them with love and succor.

Enough pain had been present in Georgiana and William's lives. All Georgiana wanted was for William to marry a woman who loves him, a woman exactly NOT Caroline Bingley. But she had to be realistic. The kind of ruin that the Bennet's faced could not be overcome easily. Miss Lydia's shame will taint all the other sisters, any extended family, and anyone who comes to the aid of the family. Society was cruel. William was unlikely to marry Miss Elizabeth with Georgiana's debut next season. He would not want her own reputation ruined by association. She wished with all her heart that he would forget about being the head of the Darcy Family, forget about being her guardian, forget the falseness of the *ton* and just follow his heart. But she knows he will not.

So what now.

Georgiana had acted on instinct last night. She had taken the role she believed Lady Catherine would play but with love. Her tone had penetrated his alcohol addled brain and she hoped her words had prompted him to ride for Cheapside in the pre-dawn. But if she was ever to be of use to a sober William during the daylight she would have to overcome her native shyness. Such a change to one's nature required planning. This morning Georgiana spent significant time contemplating the relationship she would like to have with William going forward. She was approaching womanhood. His gentle loving

guidance had been her rock since their father unexpectedly died, and while she would always look to him for advice, it was time Georgiana returned the favor.

She would share her mind with her brother instead of deferring without argument. Gone are the days of the fawning little sister. If William was to lose Miss Elizabeth, Georgiana would step into those shoes. She would have to find her spirit.

Now to only tell William.

Chapter 6: For the Sake of Our Sisters

Chapter Summary

Darcy and Elizabeth have the opportunity to talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London

22 September 1812

Edward Gardiner had risen early in order to go over to his warehouse. Today was the inspection of a new shipment from India and he needed to oversee the proceedings. Since his brother Bennet's death, Edward had left the daily operations to his competent clerk. The man had been with Gardiner Imports since before Edward's own father had passed and knew almost as much about the London imports business as its owner. Still, the Royal Inspector would expect the owner, not his employee, to be available to address any issues he wanted to discuss. So, Edward rose with the birds and made his way to his empty breakfast room.

The sight out of his back window was both distressing and most welcome.

Edward Gardiner was not one of England's most successful businessmen due to his sparkling personality. He was a proficient at reading people. The moment Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy had been introduced to him in the south garden of Pemberley, Edward knew that he loved Lizzie completely. Lizzie's feelings were harder to determine. She was too practiced at hiding herself from her overly excitable mother so kept her emotions very well under control. Over the three days they spent in Derbyshire, he began to suspect that Lizzie was very receptive to Darcy's attentions but it was the drive to Longbourn that convinced him. She was distraught over Lydia's elopement while they were making plans in Lambton then seemed to shut down while watching Darcy ride away from the inn. Her demeanor during their trip home was forlorn. Both Edward and Madeline had tried to engage her in some conversation regarding Darcy and Miss Darcy but she evaded their questions. With less than

one hour until reaching Longbourn, Lizzie declared that they were unlikely to see the Darcys ever again so further discussion of the acquaintance would be a waste of time. Her eyes told Edward all he needed to know. She was heartbroken.

Edward ceased considering the matter until the day Darcy appeared at their door in Cheapside. He was initially shocked to see anyone at the door to his study since the black drape had been placed on the door less than 24 hours earlier. Propriety demanded that only the closest of relations could come to a house newly in mourning. But there stood Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy, one of the wealthiest men in the whole of England with a reputation for following the rules of society without exception. And he looked dreadful.

Society would never accept the Bennets with the youngest sister's shame and the estate in the hands of a distant cousin, but Darcy did not run away as soon as was acceptable. He stayed for more than 2 hours in Edward's study listening to the whole of the tale and asking invasive questions about the welfare of the remaining family. At first, Edward was cautious to release so many damaging details about his close family. Though it was not his own daughter, if word got out to society in general that one of Edward's wards was so wholly ruined it could interfere with his business. The elite in society were uncompromising in their connections. When Darcy returned the next day, Edward decided to trust his instinct and trust the man.

He has sent Darcy regular correspondence during the entire affair and been pleased to invite the man back to his home twice since returning to London. Edward had hoped that Darcy might still harbor feelings for Lizzie but was unsure if he would ever act on those feelings. Yesterday's news about Lydia's condition had certainly been a blow to the young man and Edward had slept little last night worrying over the matter.

Now at least he had proof that both young people had their hearts in the same place.

As much as Edward wished to allow Darcy and Lizzie a little bit of peace after so many weeks of heartache, they were engaged in a compromising position in his back garden in full view of the mews. Ruination of another niece would be the end to all of their livelihoods. So, Edward stepped into the kitchens, asked Cook to send a tray with tea, coffee, and toast for three to his study and walked out into the morning sun.

Bliss!

This was the only thought running through Fitzwilliam Darcy's mind. The total bliss to be had in kissing Elizabeth Bennet. Falling into her arms had been a shock, but the moment their eyes met it was clear that all of his heart's desires were within reach. Instinct told him to kiss her, and so far, it was progressing wonderfully.

At first, she had been stiff in his arms but she slowly began to respond. After a few moments, she had snaked her arms up to the lapels on his riding jacket and was now clinging to him. Her whole body was melting into his embrace and he took a moment to savor the flavor of her lips. Tea with a bit of honey and milk. Somewhere in his conscious mind he knew he needed to end this and take her back into the house, but he couldn't give up the feel of her in his arms just yet. Hopefully Edward would be home and they could come to an understanding today and forget all the nonsense about her taking a position.

Torture!

How could she let him kiss her like this?! It was torture of the sweetest kind. Elizabeth was screaming inside to end this shameful embrace. He couldn't possibly know what he was doing. Lydia's shame was complete and all of the Bennet sisters were now untouchable. She knew he was informed about her father's death and had likely heard about Mr. Collins taking possession of Longbourn from his aunt, but surely he was unaware of Lydia's condition. They had only learned themselves two days ago by express from Uncle Phillips. Even if the gossip had been spread to the Collinses, an express would have arrived at Rosings two days ago at the earliest, more likely yesterday. Lady Catherine would likely not have informed Mr. Darcy yet. Once he knows he will regret this kiss. He will get back on that beautiful horse and never return. She would never blame him either. Any connection with the Bennet family would ruin Miss Darcy and he could never risk

his sweet little sister for Elizabeth's selfish desires.

But she could not bring herself to pull away.

His long arms felt like a shield around her small body. In all her life she had never felt more cherished than right now in his embrace. For a fleeting moment she let herself dream about riding away from all of her troubles on Incitatus with the wind in her hair as they left the scorn of society far behind. She imagined that he could take her to Pemberley and close the gates on anyone trying to invade their little world. They could be happy just the two of them for the rest of their lives.

But it wasn't just the two of them. Miss Darcy was Mr. Darcy's responsibility and she was blameless in all of this. A victim herself of the vilest man Elizabeth had ever known. They could not take away her chances of a happy and prosperous life for so selfish a reason.

Elizabeth had sisters to think of too. Lydia was going to need someone to take her baby after it was born. If all of the Bennets could keep their heads down for the remaining months until her confinement they may be able to find a respectable merchant acquaintance of Uncle Edward's to adopt the child. Another sister running off without the benefit of a church marriage would be a disaster. And while Elizabeth was too old to reasonably consider ever marrying, Mary and Kitty were young enough to avoid spinsterhood. Given a year after Lydia's confinement and the ability to move to London, Uncle Edward should be able to find them husbands within the merchant classes.

And Jane was so beautiful. Surely someone would want Jane if for no other reason than to sit peacefully in their parlor after dinner and look upon her serene face.

Yes, Elizabeth's family may have fallen so low as to be totally out of reach of the Darcys, but they still had a lot left to lose. It was time to end this charade and face Mr. Darcy's indignation. Hopefully her Uncle was still abed and hadn't seen them through the window. She would have to renew her arguments about finding a position before she could bring more shame upon them all.

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Darcy finally pulled away from Elizabeth's warm lips but only moved far enough to place his cheek upon her forehead. His arms tightened around her small waist and he inhaled the sweet scent of her hair soap, Lavender and Roses.

"Elizabeth, my love, tell me this isn't a dream from which I will shortly wake! Tell me that you are really here in my arms and can forgive all my transgressions against your family. Please dearest, tell me you will ease my suffering and agree to become my wife!"

Tears filled Elizabeth's eyes at his heartfelt declaration. This would be the moment she lost him forever. Another rejected proposal, but so different from his last. This time his words were beautiful and she wished to accept with her whole being. But it could never be.

"Mr. Darcy, I ..."

"Ahem! Darcy, Lizzie. I believe we should take this conversation inside my study. Come along please."

Edward Gardiner stood at the corner of the house by the door to the kitchens. "Give that horse to the mews boy and stop gaping at me with open mouths. It is still early and unlikely that any of the neighbors are yet at their breakfast, but the day is coming fast. It won't do to have another scandal on our hands."

Elizabeth scurried into the house while Darcy walked Incitatus back to an open stall in the mews. Edward waited until Darcy walked past him into the house before taking one last look around the back garden and returning himself.

Once all three were inside the study and seated at the low table laden with a tea tray, Darcy spoke; "Edward, I know that it must be disconcerting to have seen myself and Elizabeth in such a tender moment, but I assure you, I am prepared to protect her reputation immediately."

Elizabeth began to panic. "Mr. Darcy, I cannot imagine how you have come to address my uncle so informally, but I promise I have never given you leave to address me such. Uncle, I swear to you I have not had any contact with Mr. Darcy since we left Lambton and I have never before been in such a disgraceful position. I know that it is impossible for Mr. Darcy and I to be wed and will accept any consequences you choose to inflict on me but it is very unlikely that anyone observed us so further damage to our family is improbable."

Darcy's heart sank at her rushed words. "My love, what are you saying?! I was sincere out in the yard and my proposal to your uncle was not due to us being caught. I want to marry you, today if you'll have me. Why would you think that our marriage would be impossible?"

Elizabeth exclaimed with tears in her eyes; "You don't know what you are saying! Our situation is even worse than you can possibly understand or else you would agree with me."

"Good God! What more could there be?!!" Darcy whispered with a horrified expression on his face.

Edward had watched the growing distress of the young people in front of him and decided that it was time to take control of the conversation. "Lizzie, please modulate your voice. We don't want to be overheard by the shoppers on Bond Street. Now, I believe that there are some misunderstandings present that need clarification. First, Lizzie you should know that Darcy and I have been corresponding for many weeks now. I gave him leave to call me Edward more than a month ago. Second, he is fully up to date on the Bennet family situation, including Lydia's condition, of which I informed him yesterday when he called upon me. Finally, while I can plainly see that you two are in love with each other, I agree with Lizzie that a marriage between you is at this time impossible."

"Edward you can't be serious..."

"Corresponding for weeks! Already knows about Lydia? Why ..."

"Calm yourselves;" Edward interrupted. "I am perfectly serious Darcy and because the man needed to know Elizabeth. Now, I must leave in order to meet with the Royal Inspector at my warehouse in forty minutes. You two have much to discuss if you are ever going to come to an understanding. I believe it would be best if we kept this liaison between us for now so you cannot possibly stay in the house while I go. If you both come with me to the warehouse straight away, we will arrive before anyone else and you can use the unoccupied office at the end of the front hall near the side entrance. I will join you as soon as the inspection is complete. It may be irregular to allow such a meeting to take place behind closed doors, but I believe you both responsible enough to avoid any real consequences and the things you need to discuss must take place soon if we are to help my nieces."

With that, Edward drained the last of his coffee and rose. He ushered



Elizabeth and Darcy back into the kitchens from the servants' entrance and out the door into the mews. The warehouse for Gardiner Imports was on the next street east from the Gardiners' house. As the hour was still quite early, the three made their way across the street, down the alley, and into the side entrance without being seen by anyone.

Darcy and Elizabeth were silent as they walked, each lost to their private thoughts. Darcy, so happy not a quarter of an hour ago, was now wallowing in dejection. *Will Elizabeth ever accept my hand?!* Elizabeth wasn't fairing much better. *How can he believe that I am marriageable?! This is worse than believing him indifferent.* Before either were really ready, Edward unlocked the door to the unused office once belonging to his father and shut them inside. Darcy was handed the key and instructed to open the door for no one but Edward. After he closed and locked the door, the silence was deafening.

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Elizabeth looked around the room. There was a large oak desk with a massive black leather chair against the wall. Two smaller leather chairs sat in front of the desk and looked stiff. The desk felt intimidating and the smaller chairs were in a definite position of inferiority. Perhaps the elder Mr. Gardiner had used the difference in furniture size to gain the upper hand in negotiation. Whatever the reason, the effect was profound.

In the corner of the room sat a much less menacing couch covered in a dusty white sheet. Darcy was already carefully folding the sheet in order to avoid kicking up any dust. She followed his silent lead and sat on the edge as far from him as possible with her hands folded in her lap. How does one start such a conversation?

I love you desperately but you know you cannot marry me.

Think of Miss Darcy! How can we ruin your baby sister?

I could not bear it if you came to resent me for ruining your life.

That last thought was what started her tears again. For, if Elizabeth was honest with herself, this was the real reason she wouldn't succumb to any pressure he may lay upon her. If Elizabeth relented and secured her own happiness at the expense of the Darcys'

reputation, he would surely come to resent her selfishness. It would be better to live her life as a lonely spinster and have memories of their one kiss than to wake up one day knowing that her husband no longer loves her.

Darcy had gone from distressed to despondent when he saw her tears. He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped her eyes. With one finger under her delicate chin, he lifted her face to his and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. "Miss Elizabeth, I beg of you, please tell me what distresses you so."

She decided that honesty was her only choice. "I will not allow my selfishness to ruin your sweet sister. We cannot marry even if we both wish it were otherwise."

Darcy looked at her with sad acceptance in his eyes. She feared his next words as much as she knew they must come.

"My sister is the reason I am here today. She urged me to come and declare myself to you. She does not fear the scorn of society so why should we fear for her?"

This is definitely not what Elizabeth expected him to say. Something inside her snapped and all her sadness flashed into ire. "Why?! Why you ask?! You cannot be serious! She is but a child and you are her guardian! She hasn't even come out into society yet. She has never had the privilege of dancing at an assembly or attending a glittering dinner party. She cannot have many friends and now you wish to relegate her to the untouchables?! What can you be thinking?! You may not be willing to set aside your selfishness for another, but I am. I will not take her life away before she can live it!"

Darcy fought the urge to respond in anger. Much like her words at Hunsford, these cut him deeply. Her reproofs were not totally unfounded, but if he did not get his temper under control this interview would dissolve quickly and no solution would ever be reached. Darcy rose from the sofa and strode to the one window in the room, behind the massive desk. It was covered with a dirty blind, but seeing out was not truly his goal. After several regulated breaths, Darcy turned back to Elizabeth who had collapsed into herself. With her face in her hands, she sobbed silently, tears streaming onto her gown.

Every problem had a solution, if only he could manage to think of one. But what had his sister said last night? "*Do you not love her in part*

because she has her own mind? Perhaps you should use it!" Yes, that was it. He should not give up. Alone neither may see the solution, but together they would find it.

Silently, Darcy made his way back to Elizabeth's side and he took her in his arms in the same way he used to hold Georgiana when she had bad dreams as a child. He shushed her softly then relayed his sister's wisdom. "Georgiana told me many things last night but I believe the most intelligent thing she has ever said was to remind me of your beautiful mind. I believe that we are stronger together than apart and by working as partners we will find the solutions that elude us individually. I am totally besotted and wish to never be parted from you. I believe you have confessed this morning to loving me as well. We will find a way to secure our own happiness and protect our families, but we must consider all of the options together and not let the heartbreak of these last weeks overcome us."

"It would be more than 18 months before the shame of Lydia's situation could ever be dismissed enough to make me marriageable. And regardless of Miss Darcy's contention otherwise, I will consider her future. We could not marry until her situation is definite. That could be years yet. I cannot be a burden on my family for so long and my taking a position would do even more damage to my reputation. London society would never allow you to marry a women who had taken a position, even if I were a companion or governess to a landed family."

Darcy considered her argument for a moment then countered. "What if I were to supply your uncle with the money to support you and Miss Bennet? Then there would be more to send to your mother and younger sisters. Not directly of course as that would garner suspicion. But I've been considering diversifying my holdings and Charles recently mentioned how well some of his import stocks were fairing. This appears to be a large, well run organization and the state of Edward's furnishings speak of good profits. I could buy in as an investor and free up some of Gardiner Imports' capital."

"If anyone found out we would all be ruined. Don't forget that my Uncle shares our shame as one of Lydia's guardians and the *ton* will assign it to anyone connected to us. A capital investor from such high society will be ridiculed for investing with such a disreputable family."

After another pause, "Then perhaps you could come and be Georgiana's companion, at least outwardly. In reality, we would marry

quietly by special license and not announce the union until after Georgiana has a suitor. This way any money I send to Edward could be masked as your 'salary' and we could be together."

The hope in Elizabeth's chest was too tight. There was still much to consider. "Doesn't Miss Darcy already have a companion?"

Darcy smiled. This was not a true argument, at least not from Elizabeth. He was beginning to truly hope that they would come to a complete solution. "Yes, but Mrs. Annesley is more of her governess than a debut companion. A young lady newly out who has no mother or older sister to guide her often takes a slightly older companion for social functions. This woman is usually unmarried and serves as her friend as well as her chaperon. Mrs. Annesley does not fit that position and I was going to hire someone soon for just that purpose. And, Elizabeth, I believe we are beyond formalities. Please, my sister is Georgiana and I would be honored if you would call me William."

"I cannot think of a greater pleasure, William." Tears once again rose to Elizabeth's eyes, but they were happy tears. After another moment the crease returned to her brow. "Lady Catherine will never allow me to serve as Georgiana's companion. My ridiculous cousin continues to write her. If she doesn't know all yet, the letter telling of Lydia's condition is likely already in the post. If you defy her, she will tell all who will listen about my sister and I will be forced to resign."

Blast his aunt! "Perhaps we need to consider Miss Lydia. How many people were privy to their living situation before the duel? Would it be credible to purchase a forged marriage license for her and Wickham?"

"But my father killed him in a duel? Why would that have taken place if they had married?"

"An enraged father might still challenge the son-in-law to a duel for the heartache caused. Besides, the marriage could not be truly legal since she was 16 without a guardian present. But if we confabulated the fact that a ceremony took place it would lessen her shame. Also, now that she is pregnant, a defective marriage license will be ratified by effect of the common law. She could be considered a widow and the child legitimate."

"Would it be enough for Lady Catherine?"

"Perhaps we need to combine all three. If we also bandy about the notion that I had come to an understanding with Edward about a

business deal prior to learning of Miss Lydia's elopement, than it gives me a reason to be involved with her restoration. I would not want my substantial investment to be tarnished. I would show my support by taking on one of the sisters as Georgie's companion and use the license story in public against any rumors anyone wants to spread. Additionally, I believe we can convince Collins to reverse his course and comply with the marriage license story based on his ongoing connection to the Bennets."

All of a sudden Elizabeth felt like they could actually do this. Was it truly possible to secure their own happiness and protect their sisters? But the story was getting rather elaborate. A forged marriage license; a secret wedding; a hurried business investment. Plus playing the part of the Darcy's employee during the London Season. Elizabeth turned to Darcy; "William, I can see how the pieces fit together, but we must carefully consider who needs to know which part of the story. If too many people know of our marriage, it will surely slip one day in a most disadvantageous fashion. Also, if too many people know that we faked Lydia's wedding that will also become common knowledge. Perhaps we should wait to actually marry until after Georgiana is settled."

She was right again. "I don't know if our living under the same roof unmarried is a good idea. I am not a saint Elizabeth. But I agree with keeping the plan as quiet as possible. Georgiana would need to know about our marriage of course, and the Darcy family house servants. That may seem like a large number of people, but my servants are extremely discrete. All of them. Most are from the Grayson family who has been serving us for 5 generations. If we explain the entire situation to Mrs. Reynolds, she will decide what to tell the staff and there will be no questions and no breaches of our trust. I believe we should also tell Edward. He can help find any holes we may have missed so far and his discretion is assured. Who else in your family we tell is up to you, but I would not tell anyone else in mine. I know what Lady Catherine will say but the Fitzwilliams' reaction I am unsure of. My uncle, Lord Matlock, is a wonderful man and has always been understanding, but he has a position in the House of Lords to consider. Even Richard I cannot be sure of."

"We should tell no one in my family. Mother is the opposite of discrete. Mary would abhor the deception. Kitty would giggle and inevitably tell Maria Lucas, and Jane will be burdened by our secret. She has never been able to keep anything from mama. No, our marriage will be just you, me, Georgiana, and Uncle Edward. Everyone else shall be told the investment story to explain your

involvement.”

The smile that shone from Darcy’s face was brilliant. Not for the first time, Elizabeth thought that no one was his equal when he smiled. “Does that mean you will marry me Miss Elizabeth?”

Her eyes sparkled with wit and her left eyebrow rose. Darcy thrilled in the expression, so familiar from their prior sparing matches and unseen since she opened Jane’s letter. “Do you consider that a proper proposal Mr. Darcy?”

He laughed out loud. “Yes woman, I do consider that a proposal, though perhaps not a proper as you prefer. Here let me do number four correctly.”

“How do you come to the number four?”

“First is my abysmal attempt at Hunsford. Second was in your uncle’s back garden after a most satisfying kiss. Third was just now. And fourth shall be in a moment.” He slid off of the sofa in front of her and took both of her delicate hands in his. “Elizabeth Bennet, I have never loved anyone as I love you. I cannot live my life without you by my side. You make me better and I want nothing more than to have you as my partner body, mind, and soul. Please will you consent to be my wife?”

“Yes”

Chapter End Notes

So now we have the plan! Darcy and Elizabeth are going to save the Bennets. But we know they aren't the only ones keeping secrets and this deception will be hard to maintain.

I have taken some time during my vacation to develop this story but now I have to go back to work. The story is not nearly over yet, but I won't be able to post as often as I have the last few days. My plan is to finish one chapter a week from here out, uploading on Sunday night.

Thanks for the Kudos and let me know what you think in the comments.

Chapter 7: Confrontations

Chapter Summary

Charles, Darcy, and the good Colonel have a chat all together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

22 September 1812

“Elizabeth Bennet, I have never loved anyone as I love you. I cannot live my life without you by my side. You make me better and I want nothing more than to have you as my partner body, mind, and soul. Please will you consent to be my wife?”

“Yes”

During the ride back to his London home, Darcy was in some amount of shock that Elizabeth would finally be his wife. He had been wrestling with the decision for almost a year and despairing of ever winning her love since April. Now, it was agreed and he would become bound to her forever in just a few short weeks. Edward had come back into the room after finishing the inspection rather quickly. By 8:00am it had been decided that Darcy would apply for a special license today at Doctor's Commons and Edward's solicitor would draw up the marriage contract for both men to sign.

The only change that Edward had insisted upon was waiting until they could remove to Derbyshire before celebrating the marriage. It would be too much of a risk having the ceremony anywhere in Town. If they waited until the Darcy's could go home for the winter then the only witnesses would be persons in the Pemberley employ and the vicar who owed his position to Darcy. Elizabeth would have to marry without any family at all present, but since they had agreed already not to tell anyone other than Edward, including Miss Jane Bennet, Elizabeth decided it was not too large an additional loss. Without Edward to give her away they would have to wait until October 3, Elizabeth's 21st birthday, but that would only be a few days after the earliest possible date for the household to reach Pemberley with the

special license, so, again, no real loss.

They all agreed that if Lydia's fake marriage license ploy was to work, she would have to be removed from Meryton so as not to crumble under questioning from her family's connections. If she moved to a place where she was unknown and introduced as the young widow of a soldier, no one would ask any uncomfortable questions. The only problem was where to take her. Edward had no close connections outside London and Hertfordshire. Darcy had said he would consider the matter and come up with a solution, but, honestly, he was at a total loss. Perhaps Connor Grayson, Darcy's trusted valet, could find the solution. The Grayson family had served the Darcys for 5 generations. Mrs. Reynolds was the granddaughter of the original Mr. and Mrs. Grayson who served as Butler and Housekeeper to Darcy's Great-Grandparents. His family had always trusted a Grayson with their most sensitive needs. One of the main reasons Darcy had recommended Jon Grayson, III to Charles was his discretion and loyalty. Charles surely needed at least one person he could trust in a house otherwise run by Miss Bingley.

When their conversation had come to an end, Edward searched the hall to ensure no one was in view of the offices then had both Darcy and Elizabeth move to his office at the end near the warehouse. They had an overly animated conversation about Darcy's supposed need for a social debutant companion for Georgiana and Elizabeth's acceptance of such a position. Edward announced that he would have his solicitor draw up the employment contract and Darcy should return later in the day to sign the contract and take dinner with their family. Afterwards, Elizabeth would relocate to the Darcy Townhouse. This conversation was designed to give the cover story some legitimacy as well as provide a reason for Darcy's visits. Additionally, if the Darcys removed from London immediately then there could be no additional talk about Elizabeth joining the house in haste.

After their conversation closed, Edward asked Elizabeth to return to the house in order to explain her new situation to her sister and aunt then pack her belongings. Before she had disappeared beyond the view from Edward's window, Darcy was pulled back into the room by a startling question from the older man.

"Darcy, I'm not sure the proper way to bring up this topic with you, but since you lost your father young I'm just going to come out with it. Have you been intimate with a woman before?"

Darcy just stared for a few moments as his color rose. "I am not

uneducated in the matter but I have never ruined a young maiden or compromised any lady if that is your meaning.”

“While that is reassuring, in fact it is not quite my meaning.” Now it was Edward’s turn to redden at the cheeks. “I was more concerned about your education in the procurement of an heir, specifically, how quickly that event can sometimes occur.”

Another blank stare followed by a slow look of horror appeared on Darcy’s face. “Are you implying that a child could result from our union before Georgiana’s debut?” Darcy’s own parents had been married for nearly 4 years before Darcy had been born and then it took another 11 years before Georgiana came into the world. As a child, Darcy had heard about his mother losing children between himself and his sister, but he was unaware of how often such things normally happened. Thinking upon the matter now, it seemed quite obvious that his parents had difficulty begetting children, which could account for the long wait before his birth. And in fact he had no idea whether his mother had suffered other losses before his birth. This plan obviously needed some revising.

“I am not saying that anything is set in stone, but Jane was delivered not a year after my sister and Bennet were married. Lizzie came before Jane was two years old and then each Mary, Kitty, and Lydia came about 18 months apart. Also, it is obvious that Lydia conceived with no trouble within a fortnight of becoming intimate with Wickham. It would be the ruination of all our plans if Elizabeth were to appear next summer heavy with child.”

Edward could see the growing worry on Darcy’s face and decided to be blunt once again. Putting on his best neutral businessman demeanor Edward continued; “Have you heard of Jeremy Bentham the reformist? He has been promoting an item called a condom in some of his recent publications. It has been around in Italy and France for many years but not in wide use here in England. Apparently, it is a sheath made of animal intestines that covers the male organ and used primarily to protect against the French disease. As a side observation, it also keeps a woman from conceiving. They are sold in bars and at a shop near Covent Garden to men wishing to engage female companionship of the variety to be found near the theaters. Also, our military has been purchasing them in bulk to try and stem the number of soldiers contracting disease in France. My services have been engaged twice to export such items to the troops in the last few years of Napoleon’s war. I can discreetly obtain several for you if you wish.”

Darcy could only nod without meeting Edward's eyes. To believe he could have compromised his beloved Elizabeth with a pregnancy simply by hoping it would not occur. How stupid! No one would ever believe that they had been married before the child was conceived even if they provided the special license as proof. Elizabeth would have been forever branded as his mistress that he took pity upon and married. His aunt would be seeking an annulment before the child was weaned. Thank goodness Edward was a man of intelligence, experience, and discretion. How much else would Darcy find himself unprepared for? Perhaps he should continue to correspond with Edward and entrust to him matters upon which Darcy needed guidance. It had been a long time since anyone had acted as Darcy's counselor. It would be nice to have such a voice every now and again.

Thankfully Edward took Darcy's non-verbal confirmation and decided to end their private interview. It was agreed that Darcy would return shortly before tea to the warehouse to sign the marriage settlement then join the family for dinner. With the brisk pace set by both master and mount, Darcy was back at the stables of his Mayfair house by 9:00am.

Charles was waiting in his study when he stepped into the house. After a quick shave and a change of clothes, Darcy decided to go see what his good friend wanted and try to hurry him out of the house quickly. He had to get to Doctor's Commons before 2:00pm to apply for the license.

Darcy entered the study with as unaffected an air as possible then spoke with feigned good humor. "Good morning Charles, I'm surprised to see you so early and I'm sorry you had to wait but I was out for a morning ride when you arrived."

"Caroline knows Darcy."

A blank stare turned into absolute horror as Darcy considered the abrupt words of his closest friend.

"Stop staring at me like that and tell me what we are going to do about Jane's family. I know you have been working on the problem from the moment Miss Elizabeth and the Gardiners left Pemberley and

I've done all I could to keep Caroline in the dark but if we don't act fast this whole thing will blow up before tea tomorrow."

Darcy noted the strong demeanor rarely seen in Charles's words and expression. The ever affable young man looked years beyond his age for once and was facing a problem straight on instead of allowing others to take the lead. "I don't know how you came to learn about the Bennet family's situation but I will guess that the housekeeper at Netherfield has been the one to inform Caroline."

"Yes, yes, both my sister and I have servants who send us gossip but that is not the point. The only thing that matters now is that Miss Lydia ran off with Wickham, Mr. Bennet killed the reprobate and got himself killed in the process, Miss Lydia now finds herself with child, and my beautiful angel is suffering! I won't stand by and let my sister ruin the love of my life like she has ruined so many others in the god-forsaken tea parlors of the *ton*, so I ask you again, what are WE going to do about it?!?"

For a moment Darcy contemplates telling Charles the whole story. He is obviously still in love with Miss Jane Bennet and not afraid to protect her and the family. It might be beneficial to let another person in on the story, to gain another perspective, and Darcy knows Charles is extremely intelligent. He may not let it show every moment of the day, but when it counts, Charles can out think many. But he and Elizabeth had agreed, it was to be only them, Georgie, and Edward. Anyone else poses a risk to the exposure of their plans.

"I have indeed been in contact with Edward Gardiner since the untimely death of Mr. Bennet. He and I have agreed that the best plan is to purchase a fake marriage license for Miss Lydia and Wickham. She will be relocated to somewhere yet to be determined and passed off as the widow of a soldier. Her relations and connections will be told that the ceremony took place before they reached London and without her father present, which is why he still insisted on the duel that took both men's lives. My involvement will be explained by making it known that I have invested a large sum of money in Gardiner's import business that I would not like to see sullied by such gossip. Most of society will accept my word on the ceremony and will drop the gossip as the simple elopement with a tragic end of persons below their notice. In addition to the fake license, I intend to hire Miss Elizabeth as Georgiana's social debutant companion in a show of faith in the respectability of the remaining sisters. With such a connection to the Darcy name, the gossip will die before the babe is even churched. With any luck, the remaining Bennet sisters would be

marriageable after the full year of mourning for their father. Of course none could entertain a suitor until Mrs. Bennet's half mourning begins in February."

Charles nodded his head. Inside he was sad that Darcy wouldn't get beyond the scandal in order to take Miss Elizabeth as his bride, but Darcy was in a completely different situation from the Bingleys. His uncle was an Earl! No, it was heartbreaking but understandable that the best Darcy could do was give Miss Elizabeth a respectable position. At least as Miss Darcy's companion she would be exposed to the London marriage market and someone like Bingley, with money from trade, may see her as acceptable. All hope was not lost.

"Well old friend, this business deal sound pretty good. I must have given a hefty sum myself. In fact, now I recall us all discussing the same during our day of fishing at Pemberley."

"Charles, that is all well and good, Gardiner Imports does make sizable profits, but how can we say we came to such a conclusion at Pemberley? Your brother Hurst was with us while we fished and he would surly have noticed if you committed several thousand pounds to someone else's business."

"But we did discuss Gardiner's business while fishing and Hurst can attest to that. I'll simply say that we came to an agreement in the afternoon over billiards when Hurst went upstairs to drink a much too early glass of port and nap. We can even go so far as to say that we sent word to our respective solicitors to negotiate the deal and they had reached an agreement before any of us learned of Miss Lydia's condition. This way I can keep Caroline quiet. She'll never want any of her precious money in jeopardy. Also, since I will say it was you who convinced me to invest, she won't question the initial connection either. Whenever I want anything in particular, all I need say is it was your advice to do so and there is no argument whatsoever." With a self-satisfied grin, Charles leaned back and took another sip of his coffee that had been delivered long before Darcy's return to the house.

Darcy could think of no real objection. "All right. I will mention this to Edward tonight when I return to sign Miss Elizabeth's employment contract. I can give you the address to the Gardiners' house in Cheapside so you can call on Edward and finalize the investment payment."

"Better yet, why don't I join you in calling today and have it all done with." Charles knew that Jane was living with the Gardiners and if he

dropped by he might have the privilege of seeing her for a moment.

Darcy did not want Charles to accompany him to Edward's warehouse where he might see the marriage contract. "I am invited to Edward's business office for tea then to dine with the family. Afterwards, Elizabeth is removing to Darcy house because we will be leaving for Pemberley in two mornings time. If you would like to call at the house for afternoon tea, I can bring Edward back to the house after meeting with his solicitor."

Just then a bang was heard coming from the front foyer. "Damnit man, you know who I am! Now out of my way. I intent to see my idiot of a cousin before the day gets any brighter!" It was undoubtedly Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam but Darcy was dumbfounded to know how he was in London today. He sent word that he was removing to Rosings for his annual Autumn summons from their Aunt and only left for Kent yesterday! Glancing at the clock, Darcy noticed the time was 10 minutes until 10:00am. If Richard left Rosings at first light, he would have had to nearly gallop full speed the whole way to Mayfair to arrive before 10am**.

Both Darcy and Charles were startled when the bellowing began again, this time much closer to the study door. "Fitzwilliam Darcy I know you are here and I know you are hiding from the world! Bloody Hell!" BANG! The study door opened so fast that it left an indent in the plaster wall. "Why did you not tell me of Wickham and Miss" Richard stopped short of naming the young lady when he notice Charles Bingley in the room. If that harpy of a sister of his found out, they would all be in hot water.

"Hello cousin. It is nice to see you. Would you please come sit down and have some coffee. I'll also ring for some more substantial breakfast as I'm sure you have had none, riding out at first light from Kent. Additionally, Charles knows about Miss Lydia Bennet eloping with Wickham but I'm at a loss as to how you know."

"Bullocks! Does your younger sister also know?! And don't play nice with me Darcy. You haven't responded to over 4 letters I've written in the last month and I'm forced to find out about Wickham's death from our Aunt! Not to mention a host of other things that have befallen our good friend's family. Does he know all?" Richard was still standing in the door frame and practically yelling at his cousin.

With some of his usual humor restored at the petulant stance of a man dressed in full regimentals with a saber around his waist Charles

responded to Richard. "Yes, Caroline knows and yes, I know everything including Miss Lydia's condition. I take it Mr. Collins has reported all via express to his former patroness? How lovely. It's wonderful to have such devotion from one's minions. Though one would hope a man of the cloth who now owns his own estate would consider his family before a woman who once gave him a position, but not everyone can be logical. You'll have to convince Collins of your plans and use his own intimate connect to the Bennets to carry your point. Maybe even make him fearful for his own future children's reputations or maybe that of his sister by marriage, the young Lucas girl, what was her name? Marianne, Miranda ...?"

"Miss Maria Lucas. Yes, I agree Charles. It was one of the stops I planned to make on the way to Pemberley. The sycophant has drooled all over my shoes as well as Lady Catherine's so I hope if I come to him and ask him on behalf of my investment and his family connection to get in line it will be all I need. Additionally, I know that Mrs. Collins is a resourceful and intelligent woman. She is also an intimate of Miss Elizabeth's, so hopefully she will be able to keep her husband under control."

Richard finally moved into the room to take a seat when a maid entered with a breakfast tray and coffee. In truth he was dreadfully hungry considering he had fled Kent with only much liquid and some toast in his stomach. When he went down to find coffee, Anne was sitting in the breakfast parlor enjoying her tea in quiet then Lady Catherine joined them a few minutes later. He was able to say his peace to both ladies then leave at just past 7:30am. Two horse changes later, he was pulling into Mayfair at near 10am with a blinding headache from all the terrible brandy he had consumed and an empty belly. "You mentioned a plan? Is something going to be done to help the Bennets? Miss Elizabeth could have been your wife if only you would have taken your head out of your horse's arse and asked her to marry you! Your pride will be the ruination of all your happiness, mark my words!"

"Richard what has gotten into you this morning? I've never heard you talk such!"

"Well you best acquaint yourself with my talking such because you are going to hear much more of it from now on. I have mollicoddled you since your mother died but no more! I will now be telling you when I disagree with your decisions and you shall learn what makes the new recruits to His Majesty's Army fear your fierce cousin! As a side note, I threw you to the wolves with our Aunt. She was not happy."

Charles was failing to contain his mirth. “Colonel, I do believe you are nearly drunk!”

“Of course I am man! I had enough brandy last night to send either of your pampered gentlemanly arses to an early grave.” Richard covered his eyes as he sipped his coffee. “Now tell me this plan of yours and let me decide if you have any value as military strategists.”

After listening to the plan, Richard agreed that it was solid and even provided the final piece to the puzzle. “We shall take Miss Lydia, now Mrs. Wickham and we should all practice calling her such now to ease the transition, to our Great-Aunt Lady Gwyneth Fitzwilliam in Scarborough. She would be happy to have the company and would be sympathetic to Mrs. Wickham’s situation. The two might even find solace in confiding with one another.”

“I remember mention of Lady Gwyneth, but I cannot now fully recall her situation. Why would she be good for Miss Lydia, ... I mean Mrs. Wickham?”

“Lady Gwyneth Fitzwilliam is the youngest sister of the former Earl, our grandfather. She was born to the second wife of our great-grandfather very late. In fact, she is younger than your mother was by nearly 11 years. Her mother was the buxom younger daughter of another Earl and basically given to great-grandfather Fitzwilliam as payment for some land deal between the two. There was a mini scandal because the marriage took place only one month after our great-grandmother was dead and Lady Gwyneth was born in a short seven months as a very healthy and robust young babe.

“Anyway, after the old man’s death, the Dowager Matlock went to live with her sister instead of moving into the Matlock Dowager house and was very rarely heard from again. She even left Lady Gwyneth with our Grandmother Fitzwilliam to raise. Your mother was furious about the marriage and Lady Gwyneth’s birth. You know how she loved her grandmother. Be that as it may, there was still a young child to be raised. Unfortunately, our grandfather was not very interested in playing father to his sister so she was mostly left alone. My father often would keep Lady Gwyneth entertained during breaks from school, but before the Lady was out into society, he was married to mother and worrying about his own affairs.

“When she was 16 a man began courting her. You were 5 at the time, I was 7, but your mother’s dislike of the lady kept you from having much contact with her. I remember the man from one visit he made to

Matlock house in London but cannot remember him beyond that he had some sweets for my siblings and me. Grandfather Fitzwilliam was elated to have a man willing to take his baby sister, younger than his own children whom were all married and having children of their own, and did not do much in the way of vetting the young man. He simply handed over her £20,000 dowry and wished them luck.

“As it turned out, the man was already married so her marriage license and even her marriage settlement contract with our grandfather was invalid. He took Lady Gwyneth to a rundown estate in Scotland, kept her for about 6 months, and then left in the middle of the night with all of her money except roughly one thousand pounds. There wasn’t even a serviceable carriage for Lady Gwyneth to leave for Matlock. She sent word to my father of her situation and he went to retrieve her at once. Unfortunately she was with child and had to be placed in one of the remote Matlock holdings near Scarborough. She was delivered of healthy twin boys, a Geoffrey and Malcom Fitzwilliam, a few months after the disappearance of her fake husband.

“After our grandfather passed, my father placed the estate in Scarborough in the name of her older, by 2 hours, son, Geoffrey, and named Lady Gwyneth as the trustee until her son’s 18th birthday. She has lived in the sea town ever since and her sons are now about 23 years of age. The younger, Malcom, is the vicar in the town parish. The estate is relatively prosperous and supports a house in town as well as a generous allowance for the younger brother. My father visits her at least once a year, and I make an additional trip every time I am ordered to Newcastle for brigade training.”

Darcy listened wide-eyed to the whole of the tale. He was vaguely aware of his grandfather’s youngest sister, but the circumstances causing her to be estranged from the greater Fitzwilliam family were completely unknown to him. How extraordinary that his family had shunned such a person as the daughter of the old philandering Earl simply because her mother was used by men in power as a plaything to replace the beloved Countess. It also did not escape Darcy’s notice that her mother was not some low born woman upon whom the Earl had taken pity after getting her pregnant. In fact, there were a line of those kinds of women from the time even before his first wife’s death. Nearly 12 known Fitzwilliam cousins had been placed with respectable merchant class families during the old man’s reign and their mothers promptly discarded to wherever ruined women with no money go. No, this woman had been the daughter of an Earl herself, which is likely the only reason she had been “saved” with a marriage

upon the death of their great-grandmother. Darcy was brought back to the conversation by Charles.

“How sad to hear of a real life so much like Goldsmith’s tale of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. She would likely be a wonderful companion for Miss Lydia. Young enough to commiserate and comfortably guide the young mother through her confinement but experienced enough to provide the steady hand of a mother.” Hearing the Colonel’s tale only reinforced Charles’s desire to take his beautiful Jane far away from the expectations of the *ton* and live like simple, upstanding Englishmen. Like Mr. Bennet had lived.

“Yes Richard, I believe that situation would suit all admirably. Will you please send our Aunt an express with the request?”

“I will certainly send her an express, but we should not wait for a response. I shall accompany you to Hertfordshire to spread the news about Mrs. Wickham’s new living situation then I shall take the young lady to Scarborough myself. As luck would have it, Mrs. Marshall, the Housekeeper of Lady Gwyneth’s Scarborough house, and her daughter Miss Marianne Marshall are in Town now trying to find Miss Marianne employment as a ladies maid. They arrived six days ago and plan to return shortly. They can accompany myself and Mrs. Wickham all the way to her new home.”

“Is Mrs. Marshall one of the Grayson grandchildren? Cousin to my Mrs. Reynolds?”

“Yes. Sarah Grayson, Mrs. Reynolds’s aunt, married one of the long-time Matlock manservants, a Mr. Emerson Walker, and they went to Scarborough to care for Lady Gwyneth upon my father’s request. Their daughter, Mrs. Marshall, is now the head housekeeper and is first cousin to Mrs. Reynolds. Miss Marianne is a wonderful young girl but has had no luck finding a position in London. She will be kept on in Scarborough until something can be secured for her.”

Darcy thought about the connection for a moment then decided he would offer the position of Ladies Maid for Elizabeth to Miss Marianne Marshall. She would need one as Georgie’s social companion anyway, so the additional hire would not give away their marriage and Elizabeth deserved a quality abigail to care for her. Additionally, Darcy always preferred to hire house servants from families already serving the Darcys and there was no family with more persons serving than the Graysons. “Do you think Miss Marianne would come to work for me as an upstairs maid with the added responsibility of preparing

Miss Elizabeth for Georgie's social functions?"

"Yes I believe that would be a wonderful position. I shall mention the situation to her upon my return to Matlock House. Now, I must go. I am tired and smell of horse. This afternoon, after I take a much needed nap, I shall inform my father of the official story, let him know I am taking Mrs. Wickham to Lady Gwyneth, and contact a man I know about the fake marriage license as I certainly don't expect you to know where to find such things. When do we leave for Hertfordshire?"

"I plan to leave at first light in two days, on the 24th. I have several errands to run today as well before going back to Cheapside to sign Miss Elizabeth's contract with Edward Gardiner. Perhaps we should all say farewell for now." Darcy rose to see his guests out. He needed to ride directly to Doctor's Commons now in order to ensure he was able to apply for the special license today.

Charles also stood. "Yes gentlemen, I must also be going. I told my servants that I was going to my club this morning, and I had best put in an appearance so as to keep Caroline from suspecting my true location. Would you mind if I lied and told her I met you on the street and we had drinks at White's in order to discuss the situation with our investments? I know you want to keep your house closed to callers, but a trip to the men's club is hardly an invitation to call before the knocker is replaced. If you leave by the 24th, surely she will not barge in like the good Colonel did before you remove to Pemberley."

"Yes Charles, I believe one trip to White's today is an acceptable lie to placate Caroline. Good luck with the storm that I am sure is brewing in her upstairs parlor. Shall I meet you back here at 4pm so we can call on the Gardiners for tea or would you rather the address to come directly?"

"I will come back here. That way I can again tell Caroline that you asked me to accompany you on a trip to the Gardiners' home to remedy the situation instead of going alone. I shall be here dressed to call at 4pm sharp. Good day."

Finally all three men strode out of the back door of Darcy House to accomplish their respective tasks. Darcy marveled at the depth of their plan and how this whole crazy scheme might just work. He was unaccustomed to having so many good heads helping him make decisions. It was refreshing. He did not feel so heavy as he would normally after coming to such enormous decisions. Perhaps he should

look to his friends and relations more often to help lift his burden and to have them comment on his plans.

Apparently, even Richard had something to teach him.

Chapter End Notes

** I chose a location close to the London County / Kent County Boarder for Rosings and Google Mapped how long it would take to bike between Mayfair, London and this location inside Kent, thinking a person could bike about as fast as they could take a horse. It was about 2.5 hours. So, I gave Richard almost 3.5 hours in order to change horses twice after riding his mount so hard.

Chapter 8: No More Foolishness

Chapter Summary

The Darcys and Elizabeth travel to Hertfordshire and speak with the Bennets and Collinses about the living arrangement for the newly minted Mrs. Wickham.

Chapter Notes

I've had some time for writing and editing this week, so here's a chapter early. I'm going to try to be on track for another chapter on Sunday, but I don't know for sure.

Law Offices of Hamilton Phillips, Esq., Meryton, Hertfordshire

24 September 1812

Lydia had to escape the house for a little while. Her mother was becoming unbearable with all of the wailing and calling out to no one for smelling salts. Kitty was a giggling fool and always running off to see Maria Lucas. Don't even ask about Mary. She hadn't so much as looked at Lydia since the day the physician confirmed that she was with child. How can everyone she's ever known and loved have turned on her so quickly? Her mother had always bemoaned their entailed estate and lectured the Bennet sister about getting married as soon as possible. On the day she left Brighton, Lydia had actually thought that her mother would be proud of her for eloping with Lt. Wickham. He was handsome, had an officer's position in the militia, and wanted to take Lydia with him for an immediate marriage. To be married before any of her older sisters would have really been an accomplishment. But Lydia was no longer naive. She had known shortly after arriving in London that Wickham was not going to marry her unless someone with money intervened.

When Wickham first took her to his bed, she was totally ignorant of the marital relations between men and women, including that it was the physical act that resulted in pregnancy. She understood now why so many older women bemoaned their wifely duties. It was uncomfortable and some days downright painful. Wickham had at least never tarried long and rarely came to her more than twice in one week. It was more often when they were in London, but still not every

day thankfully.

During the ride from Brighton to London, Wickham drank a whole bottle of whiskey that he had taken from one of the other officers. At first, he was speaking to her kindly and promising to take her to all sorts of entertainments. Then, as the ride went on and Wickham drank more, he began to speak of the other establishments he was going to visit, alone. She became annoyed at his vulgar speech and had asked him if he would give up running around with other women after they married. Immediately, he had become belligerent. He yelled at her that he would only marry her if her family could come up with £10,000 for a dowry and another £2,000 for the debts he left behind in the militia. He said that he had only brought her with him for female company and as an excuse to desert his post. She was shocked! He was supposed to be an officer and a gentleman. Maybe Lizzie had been right about him when she came back from visiting Charlotte, his story about Mr. Darcy was probably more exaggeration than fact.

Once they had taken that dreadful room in the brothel, she began to realize that she was totally ruined and only marriage would save not only her own life, but all of her sisters. She hoped that she could keep Wickham in London long enough for her Uncle Edward to find them. He was their most prosperous relation and perhaps could meet Wickham's price. But instead of her wealthy tradesman uncle, in walked her father not four full days after they had arrived. He was a welcome sight to the flagging Lydia, but his enraged response to Wickham's demand for money was the beginning of the end. Both men had died from the duel then the whole family had been turned out by Mr. Collins because of her foolish behaviour. Even worse, Jane and Elizabeth had been separated from the rest of them as Uncle Phillips could not take in all six women. And now she would be the complete ruination of all her family. Especially her sisters.

Jane and Lizzie were getting to be old for women without a dowry. At 22, Jane was nearly an old maid but she was extraordinarily beautiful and serene, perhaps there was hope. Lizzie would be 21 in a few short weeks. She was very attractive in her own way, but slight of build and without the curves most men appreciated. She was also too intelligent for her own good. Papa had always treasured her intelligence and wit, but mamma had warned her repeatedly that her sharp tongue would be the end of all her chances for a husband.

Lizzie would never marry.

Lydia was sad with this realization. She had never been close with her

second oldest sister, but she did love all of her sisters. Lizzie had always been the strong one of the family. Whenever mamma was overcome with some nervous fit and papa would retreat into his library, Lizzie made sure Kitty and Lydia were reading their books and behaving. Lizzie always took the younger girls out into the garden to play games when their lessons became too much a bore. And it was always Lizzie who came in from the woods with juicy, sweet apples or a handkerchief full of perfectly ripe blackberries, and she always shared with her sisters.

Often, as she got older, Lydia would scoff at her older sister's reproaches about her behaviour in society. But now it is plain to see that, where their mother was content to allow her youngest girls to flirt shamefully in pursuit of husbands, Jane and Lizzie were actually trying to teach them how to behave in order to attract the right sort of man.

Unfortunately, after years of hearing their mother's complaints daily, Lydia had started to believe the things her mother had said about Lizzie. That she was too headstrong and would never be attractive to a man. That she should read less and pay more attention to her ribbon trims. Lydia and Kitty had laughed and laughed at Lizzie's rejection of Mr. Collins, saying how stupid their intelligent sister was for refusing the only offer she was likely to ever receive.

Now, Lydia had made sure that Mr. Collins was exactly the only man who would ever offer for her witty sister.

In the immediate aftermath of their father's death and being forced to leave their home, Lydia had joined in with their mother's abuses of Lizzie. They blamed the family's situation on Lizzie's absurd refusal of Mr. Collins. If only she would have married the ridiculous man they could have stayed in their home. She parroted their mother in cursing Lizzie and was very vocal about how unfair it was that Uncle Edward was taking her to London to have all the entertainments available in Town and introduce her to eligible young men.

Now however, Lydia couldn't be upset with Lizzie. Mr. Collins would have made her sister miserable, and he might have thrown the rest of the family out of the house anyway due to Lydia's folly. In the last week, her mother had turned on her. Mrs. Bennet couldn't even look at Lydia without yelling about how stupid she was and how terrible of a thing she had done. Funny enough, her mother's censure, experienced for the first time, was the eye piece that finally brought her entire life into focus. Their mother was foolish, often speaking out

of turn and imprudently in company. Lizzie and Jane had frequently been embarrassed by their mother, and now Lydia could see why. It was probably their mother's outlandish pursuit and loud vocalizations of the impending marriage between Jane and Mr. Bingley that had caused the gentleman's hasty departure from Netherfield.

She was also not a very good parent. Lydia had been totally unprepared for the real world. She was told to flirt, be silly, chase after men, and snatch one as quickly as she could. Lydia had followed her mother's instructions to the letter. And now she was ruined. If only she had listened to Lizzie more.

Eventually her thoughts turned to how much she wished to apologize to her second oldest sister and to ask the most intelligent member of their family what she should do now. The last time she had seen Jane and Lizzie, she was crying and pouting about being left behind in boring Meryton. Lizzie came to say goodbye and give her a kiss on the cheek, but Lydia had turned her head and walked back into Uncle Phillips's house. Oh how she wished she could take back the hurtful things she had said! After musing on how she could ever adequately word such a letter, the object of her mind walked into the room carrying a tray of fresh tea and sweet breads.

"Lizzie! Whatever are you doing here? Is everyone alright in London?"

Elizabeth put down with tray and held out her hands to her youngest sister. "Yes Lydia. Everyone in London is doing just fine. I've stopped here on my way north to see our mother and discuss something of import with you specifically."

Lydia ushered her sister into the chair she had been occupying and pulled up a new seat from their uncle's desk. As she poured tea for both of them, a courtesy Lydia had never before preformed, she stated; "Whatever you have to say I'm sure I'll be delighted to hear it. I've just been sitting here in the quiet thinking about all of the wise things you have said in the past to which I should have paid much more attention."

To say that Elizabeth was stunned would be a gross understatement of her current reaction to her obviously altered sister. "I'm glad to know that someone will welcome my presence. I fear mother's reaction when she learns I am in the house. But tell me sister, are you well? Has our mother and uncle been treating you kindly?"

Lydia folded her empty hands in her lap and hung her head. "I would

not say that my recent behaviour merits anyone treating me kindly, but they have not been cruel. Our mother is quite upset with my condition and I am at a loss as to what to do to ease the situation.”

Placing her cup and saucer on the tray, Elizabeth took both of Lydia’s hands in her own and bent down to catch her sister’s eye. “This is what I have come to speak to you about. I hope you will not be angry, but Uncle Edward and I have been making plans for you and believe that our solution is a good one, but it will require you to be very brave.”

Lydia looked up with wide eyes brimming with tears. “Lizzie, if you have come to the solution for my situation, I will be brave.”

“I know you will sister. You have been through a lot recently and I do not want to add to your worry but both Uncle Edward and I feel it would be better if you were removed from mamma and our connections here in Hertfordshire. Mr. Darcy has recently invested a significant sum with uncle’s imports business and in the interest of protecting his investment, he has taken a position of support for our family. He and his cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, whom I met while visiting Charlotte in Hunsford last spring, have procured a forged marriage license for you and Mr. Wickham. Mr. Darcy explained all the complicated legalities to Uncle and me, but simply put, your having participated in a church wedding ceremony, even without our father to give you away, combined with your pregnancy will now make you Mr. Wickham’s widow.

“You can be Mrs. Wickham and your child considered legitimate. So, even though the elopement would be a slight scandal, no one will care for very long since we shall say you did attempt to get married without any bribery from our family. The license is dated August 2nd, the day after you left Brighton, and says the marriage was celebrated in Croydon, just south of London. We don’t want too many unanswerable questions, so it would be better if you were not around to have to face the inquisition from our connections.

“Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam have a Great-Aunt, the Lady Gwyneth Fitzwilliam, who lives in a comfortable home in Scarborough. She is willing to bring you into her home and help you through your confinement. She has twin sons herself who are 23 years old. She also suffered from the deceit of a disreputable man. Her husband was a bigamist and took her £20,000 dowry after only 6 months of their invalid marriage, leaving her pregnant and penniless in Scotland. The current Earl of Matlock, Colonel Fitzwilliam’s father

and Mr. Darcy's uncle, is quite fond of his aunt and has even gifted her oldest son one of the smaller Fitzwilliam estates about 10 miles from the seaside town of Scarborough. I believe Mr. Darcy said the younger son is the town's vicar. Mr. Darcy has never been to Scarborough but Colonel Fitzwilliam says it is lovely and Lady Gwyneth lives on the side of the cliff near Scarborough Castle. I'm told that one can see the sea from the breakfast parlor. They will protect you, and your child, I promise. It may also be possible for you to keep the babe, if that is your choice after he or she is born. If you choose to place the babe with an adoptive family, we can discuss that arrangement after you both are churched.

"In addition to your new living situation, Mr. Darcy is showing society that he supports our family by hiring me as the social debutant companion for Miss Georgiana Darcy. I will no longer be a burden on our uncles, Mary can accompany Uncle Edward to London in my place, and Uncle Phillips will only have to support mamma and Kitty. That is why I am here. The Darcys are relocating to Pemberley for the winter and I have already taken my position in their household. You will travel with us until we reach Mr. Darcy's estate in Derbyshire. We shall all rest for a day or two then Colonel Fitzwilliam will escort you along with the motherly housekeeper of Lady Gwyneth's Scarborough house, Mrs. Marshall, the rest of the way to Scarborough. He is needed in Newcastle in a month, so will stay on for a few days to ensure everyone is settled into the new situation before traveling north again. I know that was a lot to consider all at once, but do you believe this plan to be one with which you would be willing to cooperate? It is you who has to relocate most of the way to Scotland and live with people none of your family has ever before met. What are your feelings?"

Lydia just stared at her sister with mouth agape. To think of the cost and inconvenience so many people had incurred because of her selfish stupidity. Her uncle was likely worried about the reputation of his business if Mr. Darcy was coming to her rescue for the sake of his investment. And to be welcomed into a stranger's house on nothing more than the word of her great-nephews. But worst of all, Lizzie had already taken a position. She was no longer a gentlewoman, but a servant. Granted, companions and governesses were in the highest class of servants and were often gently bred, but a servant nonetheless.

If Lydia had before only believed it *likely* that her sister would never marry because of her actions, now it was written in stone.

Lydia would be able to present herself as a respectable widow while her older, wiser, compassionate sister would live her life as a servant. Once Miss Darcy married, she would have to find a new family to serve and so on. Probably only staying with one family for at most 5 years then moving on again. Hopefully the connection with Mr. Darcy will ensure she always finds work with the most respectable families. The tears filling her eyes spilled over and when she spoke her voice was barely above a whisper. "Lizzie, how can you ever forgive me?"

"Lydia, come now, this was not your fault. Mr. Wickham promised to marry you and our mother has always said that marriage was the most important thing. I could never blame you for that rogue's dishonesty. Come here dear, it will all be ok."

"No Elizabeth, I will not let you take all of the burden for this. I was foolish, I was selfish, I was naught but a little girl playing with things I did not understand. You and Jane tried to tell Kitty and I that we were not behaving properly at nearly every social function papa let us attend. But I never listened. And now, you have taken a position and degraded yourself while elevating me into the position of widow. I get to keep my status as a gentlewoman and go to live with the daughter of an Earl while you are reduced to merely a gently bred servant. I do not believe I will ever be able to repay you this kindness."

Elizabeth sat for a moment and considered what to tell her baby sister, so grown up in this moment and close to having a baby of her own. Should Elizabeth tell Lydia about her planned marriage to Mr. Darcy? She is going to live in a faraway town with persons she has never met and attempt to first birth then perhaps raise a baby. Also, there are never certainties in childbirth. She may not survive the experience. A few well-placed words from Elizabeth could relieve her conscience and help her move on to a more peaceful life. "Lydia, I am going to tell you something but first you must promise never to repeat what I am going to say to you now. Not to Mary, not to Kitty, certainly NOT to mamma, and not even to Colonel Fitzwilliam or Lady Gwyneth. Can you make that promise?" Lydia's eyes widened a bit at Elizabeth's tone and her words but she nodded her head. "I love Mr. Darcy, I have for some time. He is the best of men. He made me an offer of marriage in April that I refused based on lies from Mr. Wickham and my own misinterpretation of his character during his stay at Netherfield. We have mended our mutual miscommunications and come to an understanding. He is doing all of this because it is our intention to marry as soon as our sisters are secure. I may play the part of a social companion for the upcoming season in order to protect Georgie from any societal scorn, but I will live my life as the esteemed Mrs. Darcy,

Mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House London. Uncle Edward and William have already signed the marriage settlement contract and applied for the special license. You need not worry about my welfare. I do all this in order to protect you, Kitty, Mary, Jane, and my newest sister Georgiana from the foolish gossip of spite filled people in London. I will see all of my sisters happy and secure before mamma takes the grey trim from her last widows frock.”

In a moment reminiscent of the silly child Lydia had been, she giggled behind the handkerchief she was using to dry her eyes. “Truly Lizzie? You love Mr. Darcy and he wants to make you his wife? Do you think you will be happy as Mrs. Darcy? Not as Mistress of Pemberley with jewels, and firs, and fine carriages, but as Mrs. Darcy, who warms Mr. Darcy’s bed and speaks of nothing over morning coffee? Will he buy you books and share them with you as papa did? Will he allow you to walk in the morning dew and become brown skinned from refusing to wear your bonnet in the sun? I know mama was unfair in her expectations for your marriage to Mr. Collins, but that man would have made you miserable. I do not want you to sacrifice yourself to an even more financially advantageous match simply to buy a solution to the problems I have created.”

Elizabeth’s smile could have lit the whole of London in the dead of night. “Lydia, William and I truly love each other we enjoy each other’s company. Yes, I believe William will share his books and intellect with me and not mind one bit if I wish to walk bare headed in the sun. And I hope that we will always have important nothings to discuss over our morning repast.”

“I am glad. You have eased my mind considerably. I shall now be more than content to pack my things and travel to parts unknown, going to live my new life as a widow with distant cousins by marriage. When do we leave?”

Longbourn, Hertfordshire

24 September 1812

While Elizabeth and Richard spoke with the Bennet women, Darcy rode up to Longbourn house and requested an audience with Mr. William Collins. It was difficult to come calling on the Bennet's old home. It might seem odd, since Darcy spent so little time in this house while visiting the area last fall, but the manor felt empty to him without the boisterousness of the Bennet family. A quiet parlor was not at all what Darcy had anticipated and it caused him to shudder a little.

Hardly a minute after being shown to the east parlor, Mrs. Charlotte Collins walked in the room carrying a beautiful tea service from which he had seen Elizabeth serve guests previously. Seeing the pained look on the wealthy man's face and knowing from their time together both last fall and in Kent that he had a tender for her friend, Charlotte easily interpreted his discomfort. "Please Mr. Darcy, have a seat and I will pour you some tea. I know it is a bit disconcerting to be in this house when all is quiet, but I assure you it will become easier with some time. Milk or sugar?"

Darcy recovered his composure and joined his hostess in a chair near the side table. "Two sugars please. Thank you for seeing me on such short notice Mrs. Collins. It is a pleasure to speak with you again. I trust you have heard that Miss Elizabeth is in town for today and visiting her family. Though you would likely rather be visiting with her, what I have to discuss with you and your husband is of great importance and I appreciate your taking the time away from your good friend." Darcy was just about to thank the heavens for his good luck to find Mrs. Collins alone when Mr. Collins walked through the parlor door.

Mr. William Collins was the distant cousin of Mr. Bennet and, as the next closest direct line male relative, he became owner of Longbourn upon Mr. Bennet's death. He was also an ordained minister in the Anglican Church with a rather inflated opinion of himself. Oddly, his self-importance did not overcome his extreme sycophancy. When Lady Catherine had appointed him as the rector for Hunsford Parsonage, he transferred all of his loyalty to that lady and her family. In Collins's opinion, no one was more learned, more generous, or more worthy of praise than Darcy's heartless aunt. Perhaps not even the master a clergyman was supposed to serve, Christ.

Darcy said a silent prayer for patience and hoped that Collins would continue to take everything the rich man said as near gospel.

"Mr. Darcy, how delightful that you have chosen to visit our humble

estate! I hope you have not been waiting long. I was out in the garden, you will remember how much I enjoy the activity from your visits to our modest parsonage, when your express arrived requesting an audience and hurried to make myself presentable. I do hope that your family is well especially your esteemed aunt and cousin de Bourgh. I have sent Lady Catherine several communications since taking on my new position as a landowner asking for her advice with certain matters and she has condescended to respond twice. I have also taken her advice regarding my wayward family, setting them aside from the estate, but not completely without means. My dear Charlotte has been able to improve the efficiency of the house in a substantial way which allows us to send my pitiable cousins some money annually for their needs and in hopes of attracting some form of husband for the remaining sisters. It is unlikely any gentleman of land would ever consider them now, but some of the shop keepers in Meryton are yet unmarried and of course their Uncle Gardiner has connections within the merchants and tradesmen in London. Perhaps someone will find Miss Bennet's serene beauty compensation enough for the family's poor connections. Miss Elizabeth is much too strong willed to ever make a good wife, but I believe Mr. Gardiner could find her a position as a governess. Miss Lydia is of course worse than dead and as your aunt has wisely advised we do not acknowledge her in public as a fallen woman. Charlotte, have you rang for a fresh pot of tea? I'm sure Mrs. Hill could also bring some of her lemon cakes." Darcy was finding it difficult to maintain his composure during the entirety of the ridiculous little man's speech. He wanted to throttle him for saying such terrible things of his beautiful Elizabeth and the poor young woman Wickham abused, but only detached propriety would suit he purpose today. Thankfully Darcy was a man practiced in hiding his true feelings from all but the most proficient of observers.

Charlotte Collins was such an observer. She moved to quiet her husband with tea and allow Darcy an opening to begin his discourse. "Yes dear, I have tea and sweet breads here on the side table. Please sit and we shall hear what Mr. Darcy has come to speak of with us."

"Thank you Mrs. Collins. I have indeed come to speak of a matter of great importance which centers on exactly the topic of Miss Lydia, or I should say, Mrs. Lydia Wickham."

"What?! She is married? Who ... wait. Isn't Wickham the man she eloped with from Brighton? But they were never married. It is well know that my cousin Bennet found them living in great sin in London without the benefit of a church wedding! Is that little harlot now trying to pass herself off as a respectable widow since she can no

longer hide the reality of her shame? Well, I won't have it! I will go down to the Phillips house and tell my cousin that no one will ever believe her! What a shameful thing! I am sorry you have had to be privy to such outlandish lies ...”

“Mr. Collins, will you sit down!” Darcy was finally at the end of his patience and used his most commanding voice several notches louder than usual. Taking a deep breath, he continued; “I am sure that you will agree with me regarding Mrs. Wickham once you hear actually what I have to say. It is not Lydia who is distributing the rumor of her marriage but in fact me.”

“I do not understand. Why would you do such a thing?” Collins looked as if he were about to explode with red face and holding enough breath inside his lungs to make him look quite round.

Setting his best stare upon Collins, Darcy began his explanation. “Before we learned of Miss Lydia’s elopement, I made a significant investment in Edward Gardiner’s imports business. Now that the youngest Bennet is with child, the shame will reach every member of her family. And I do mean EVERY member, you would do well to consider your own reputation as we continue this discussion.” Collins blanched at that statement, instantly turning white when a moment ago he was so red. “Anyway, if it became known that one of Gardiner’s wards was so wholly ruined as to have a child out of wedlock, his business would suffer and my investment would be in jeopardy. Mr. Bingley also invested at the same time I did and we both are interested in helping salvage Miss Lydia’s reputation in order to secure our money. So, I have come here to inform you about the plans Gardiner, Bingley, and I have made for the Bennet women. I would very much appreciate if you would consent to following our version of events. As I said, it would be in your best interest as well since you are so closely connected with the ladies. You wouldn’t want Miss Maria or any future daughters you may have to be tainted by such pernicious gossip.”

Collins considered Darcy’s argument for a moment then responded. “What exactly is your version of the events leading up to Miss Lydia’s current situation?”

“We have a marriage license specifying that Lydia Bennet and George Wickham participated in a church marriage ceremony on 2 August in Croydon. That is the very day after the couple fled Brighton. Since the lady was not yet of age, the marriage could not be strictly legal when celebrated. Also, we shall say that Mr. Bennet was enraged that

Wickham would take his daughter with so little care for the consequence, so still called the man out. Even though this wedding would not be legal in the eyes of the laws of Parliament, the common law would recognize such a marriage after it produced children. Thus, the babe will make Mrs. Wickham's marriage legal. Further, Mrs. Wickham is to be taken to live with one of my Fitzwilliam relatives in Scarborough so that she becomes naught but a pitiable tale of young love gone wrong."

"How does this change her position? She is still 16 and pregnant without a husband?"

"Mr. Collins were you not listening!? Mr. Darcy has seen to it that Lydia will be considered a widow, not a fallen woman. Granted, an elopement is not the most propitious of actions, but this will be overlooked quickly as an act of young love. The remaining Bennet sisters would be marriageable and the child Lydia carries will be a legitimate issue of Lydia and Wickham's marriage. Mr. Darcy you have saved us all!" Charlotte's eyes were shining with unshed tears. Hope, so far from any reality Charlotte could have imagined before Darcy walked into her new home, was beginning to grow. Perhaps Jane and Lizzie could find happiness with the men who loved them. If Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were investing in Gardiner Imports, they must have a desire for the connection and an excuse to visit their business partner at his home. Unfortunately, Darcy's next revelation froze the smile on Charlotte's face out of shock.

"Yes, well. I of course would not want to see Gardiner Imports suffer from the foolishness of a 16 year old child and a rake. Additionally, to show my support for the family's respectability, I have taken Miss Elizabeth into my household as Miss Darcy's social companion. My sister's debut will be in the spring and she will need a woman near her own age but already out into society to act as chaperone and friend during her many social engagements next season."

"Mr. Darcy are you sure you have adequately thought through this decision? Miss Elizabeth is a quality young lady to be sure, but she is much too opinionated for superior society. Why, you observed her behaviour in your aunts parlor. She voiced her mind as if she were capable of having such thoughts as a woman of low birth. She didn't even have a governess!? I'm sure that your cousin, Miss de Bourgh, would be a much better companion than Miss Elizabeth. Once you are married to Miss de Bourgh, she would be able to perform as Miss Darcy's chaperone with ease. Perhaps it is time to solidify your relationship as your aunt wishes and prepare both Miss Darcy and the

new Mrs. Darcy for the London season together.”

Charlotte had been too wrapped up in thoughts of her poor friend moving into the position of paid employee to stop the foolish words coming from her husband. She was sure that Mr. Darcy loved Lizzie and now considered her much too tarnished for marriage. She was also sure that neither Mr. Darcy nor Miss de Bourgh wished to marry. If Charlotte had to wager, she would say that Miss de Bourgh would much rather receive an offer from her other Fitzwilliam cousin.

Darcy was done being polite. He stood, handed his tea cup to Charlotte, straightened his waistcoat and leveled a glare at Collins. “Mr. Collins, I have now said my peace about Mrs. Wickham. I will repeat, it is in **your** best interest to get in line with the events as I have stated them here. I have also already sent a communication to my aunt about the matter and ‘correcting’ the story she was told to include the most relevant details of their marriage. Before I take my leave, I will give you one last piece of advice.

“I rarely listen to my aunt or do as she bids because Lady Catherine is foolish. She listens to no one and believes what she wishes no matter how many times she has been told the facts of any matter. I have no desire to marry my cousin nor does Anne desire to marry me. In fact, my cousin does not even like me all that much. I am not now, nor have I ever been, nor will I ever be engaged to my cousin. You should start thinking for yourself and listen to the advice of your intelligent wife over the ridiculous things my aunt chooses to say. Good-day. I shall show myself out.”

Chapter 9: Truth Hardly Ever Acknowledged

Chapter Summary

Both Lydia and Lizzie take their new places.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warning! Brief mention of past rape but no full description.

Fitzwilliam House, Scarborough, Yorkshire

3 October 1812

The wind from the sea was cool and refreshing after so long a time in the carriage. Lydia was standing on the precipice overlooking the water that was just outside the back garden of Lady Gwyneth's beautiful home. To the north was Scarborough Castle, teeming with life as the northern regimentals were getting ready to tuck in for a long winter of training at the largest permanent barracks for His Majesty's Army. Not even 2 months ago, Lydia would have been pinching her cheeks and rushing up to the main road from the castle to the market. Now she hoped that she wouldn't be forced to socialize with too many of the officers at Lady Gwyneth's dinner table. Certainly she would not want to meet anyone who had known Wickham. Colonel Fitzwilliam assured her that no one from the northern regulars would know of a militia man from the Hertfordshire camp, but she still worried.

Instead of wasting any more time thinking of how she used to run after men of unknown character, Lydia turned her face to the sea. From her vantage point it seemed that the water went on forever, fading into the mist on the horizon. For the first time in her short life, Lydia felt at peace. There was no great noise coming from every direction. No wailing or giggling or sermonizing or banging on the piano. Just the sound of the waves crashing on the sand and rocks below.

Perhaps this was what Lizzie was always seeking by wondering through the woods. Silence.

The whole traveling company had left Meryton at dawn on 26 September. After their talk, Lizzie and Lydia returned to the house and greeted their mother and sisters. Mrs. Bennet was surprised to see Lizzie and demanded to know where Jane was before even saying hello to her second daughter. When Lizzie told their mother the whole of the official story, including her new position in the Darcy's house, Mrs. Bennet was furious that plans had been made without her consent. She didn't see why Lydia had to go so far away now that she was to be officially married. She was also angry with Lizzie that she hadn't somehow orchestrated a proposal for Jane from Mr. Bingley. Never mind that it would be absolutely horrid manners for them to become engaged during the Bennets' mourning period or that Lizzie had no control over the man's decision about whom to marry. When their mother started yelling about how selfish Lizzie was being by taking the position of social companion to Miss Darcy, that Jane should have been the one to have that honor, and created the expectation that Mr. Darcy would furnish both Lizzie and Jane with social attire appropriate for a woman in the upper echelons of society, Lydia could take it no more.

"And you had better make sure that you ask for a few new dresses for your sister Jane. She will be in London during the season as well and it wouldn't be difficult for Mr. Darcy to acquire something appropriate for her. You must also be sure to secure her invitations to at least the social functions that the Darcys hold in their townhouse if not all of the social functions that you will attend. Heaven knows that your presence at such events will never make you marriageable. No Lizzie, you shall get your sisters fine gowns and invitations to the best of events so that they can find husbands. In fact, Kitty, you shall go to London, not Mary, for if there was ever one of my daughters besides Lizzie who won't find a husband it is Mary. She is much ..."

"MOTHER STOP! I cannot believe that you would be so foolish and selfish as to think that Elizabeth is taking a position as a paid servant out of greed! Surely you are not so ignorant as to be blind to the enormous sacrifice that she has made to correct the errors you inflicted on us all! You have always pushed us to find men and somehow 'catch' them with our allurements. Well, I shall tell you what your advice and plans have reaped. Because you were never enough of a parent to teach me how to behave or which sorts of men were worthy and which were not, I now find myself a ruined woman. Mr. Darcy has already paid a significant amount of money to secure my respectability and I will not have you imposing yourself on his generosity.

"Furthermore, Mary is the sister who has been invited to London with the

Gardiners, so it is Mary who will go. Kitty must stay here and listen to Uncle Phillips before she will ever be able to present herself to London Society. Now, I must go pack for my new home. I regret to inform you that I will be too indisposed to take dinner with the family. Goodbye mother. I doubt you shall be awake when we depart at dawn."

That was the last time Lydia had seen either her mother or her sister Kitty. Amazingly, Mary knocked on the door to her room shortly after she stomped up the stairs to pack her meager belongings.

"I believe I have been unkind to you in the last weeks sister. I judged you for your situation without thinking about the reasons it has come about. Our sister Lizzie seems very upset at how mother has treated you lately and just remarked that Jane would be mortified to hear such things as mamma just said. ... Did you really believe that Mr. Wickham wanted to marry you?"

"Yes Mary, I did. I was foolish, but I believed him when he said that he couldn't wait to marry me and that we must hurry to Greta Green. He said that Mr. Darcy had poisoned Lizzie and she would tell our father that he was not to be trusted. He said if we didn't elope immediately that we would have to wait until I was 21 to marry and that our father would likely contract for my marriage to another man in that time because Mr. Darcy was so practiced at lying about Wickham's character. As it turns out, Wickham was the practiced liar and everything he had told us about Mr. Darcy was untrue. Even if Mr. Darcy had poisoned Lizzie against Wickham, it was with the truth of his disreputable character."

Mary stepped forward and gave her younger sister a hug then a kiss on the cheek. For the remainder of the afternoon, until the bell for dinner, Mary and Lydia carefully packed their trunks in preparation for their respective new homes. Mary, being slightly shorter but of a heavier build than Lydia, suggested that Lydia take three of Mary's dresses since she was likely to find the bodices of many of her old gowns too restrictive in the coming months. Mary had never been a vain girl who required many clothes and was just as happy to go to London with three fewer dresses.

Once Mary descended the steps for dinner, Lydia laid down in her bed with the thought that she would rather sleep until the moment that she could be free of the house. Another knock at the door brought in Lizzie, once again laden with a tray. She told Lydia that while she agreed with her decision not to take her meal with the family, she must eat. The babe required nourishment and it would not do to make either of them sick from lack of delicious hot food. The tray was piled

high with enough for at least 4 grown men instead of 2 young women and a babe of only 12 or so weeks. Apparently the Phillips's cook had always adored Lizzie and never cared for the way Mrs. Bennet treated the witty Bennet sister. Lydia was now reaping the benefits of being in someone's good graces.

The sisters ate and talked of their trip on the morrow and their hopes for the next few months. Finally Lydia asked Lizzie about her plans for the wedding that was to take place in just a few short days.

"Have you chosen which dress you shall wear? Are you going to stay in mourning? And what flowers are available this time of year? You look so lovely with white blossoms in your dark hair, perhaps the apple blooms will be ready. Does Derbyshire have many apple trees?"

"Dear sweet Lydia, I honestly have not given one thought to my wedding except for its occurrence. I supposed I shall wear my cream ball gown, the one I wore to the Netherfield Ball, as it is my only formal dress. Perhaps instead of trimming it with black I shall wear a black silk shawl or maybe I will forgo mourning dress for one hour. Our father should be able to see why I dishonor his memory by marrying in such haste after his death. I must protect my family. He will not be angry I am sure."

Their talk then turned to their father, reminiscing about his sharp humor and dry wit. No, he would not be angry with Lizzie and Mr. Darcy marrying a mere 7 weeks after his death. He would be proud that Lizzie was making such a good match with a worthy man and that she had found a way to secure the reputation and happiness of each of her beloved sisters. Also, Lizzie concluded, he would be proud of Lydia for being so mature and brave by moving nearly the whole length of the country in search of some peace.

Peace she had surely found.

After three full days in the carriage, they all pulled up to the biggest house Lydia had ever seen! It was unimaginable that Lizzie would be mistress of all that which was Pemberley. Lydia managed to hold her tongue for most of her tour with Georgiana, but near the end, when they moved into the sculpture gallery, Lydia let go a high pitched squeal. As a younger girl, Lydia had been interested in clay working, but her mother deemed the pastime too dirty and stopped any clay from being brought into the house. She was relegated to looking at drawings of sculptures in a few of her father's books.

Once, when she was about 12, her Aunt Madeline had taken all of the

sisters to an exhibit of sculptures at the British Museum. Lydia had gotten lost wondering through the rows and rows of white marble figures. Lizzie found her looking adoringly at a figure of Aphrodite crouching. She thought the woman in the sculpture was the most beautiful woman she had ever seen. Lizzie took her hand and led her back to their family while telling her the story of the ancient Greek Goddess who was indeed the most beautiful of all the gods. *“But,”* her sister had said, *“beware beauty that bewitches because though Aphrodite was indeed without comparison as to outer beauty, she was not a woman to be trusted.”* If only Lydia had remembered that warning when she met the handsome Mr. George Wickham.

At Pemberley, Lydia had been able to look at pieces of art that were as old as the ruins in Rome and as beautiful as the famed Aphrodite. On their first morning of rest, Georgiana had come looking for Lydia after the young girl missed breakfast. She was found sitting amongst the statutes with a rarely used sketchbook in her hands, trying to capture the sadness in the eyes of one of the figures. Georgiana encouraged Lydia to continue her study of drawing because she was really quite good. Though Lydia suspected that Georgiana was merely being kind, she decided to use this change in her circumstance to make a change in her attitude.

Gone was the silly flirt and in her place stood a young widow who would try to listen more than she spoke, spend some time every day reading a book of quality, and choose one accomplishment upon which to focus her efforts. Since she has never learned to play the pianoforte and is dreadful at languages, perhaps she will try drawing. In fact, the vantage point from which she currently sat was lovely. If she ever managed a halfway decent depiction of the castle by the sea she thought she could send it to Lizzie in one of her letters.

She would have to write soon, and hopefully receive a letter in return for today was her sister's 21st birthday. The day she and Mr. Darcy had intended to marry in the beautiful little chapel attached to the family wing at Pemberley. Lydia raised her face to the sky and said a silent prayer for his sister's happiness.

Soon a voice from behind brought Lydia out of her silent reverie. Colonel Fitzwilliam came from the back terrace of the house to announce that dinner was to be served in a quarter hour if she would like to refresh herself.

Once the whole party was gathered in the parlor, Lydia was introduced to Lady Gwyneth and her two sons. The great lady was

quite young for a woman with grown sons. In fact, Lady Gwyneth was not yet 40 and looked to be no older than Mr. Darcy or Colonel Fitzwilliam. She had a kind smile and was very welcoming to Lydia.

“My dear I am so glad you have come to stay with me. Now that both of my boys have enough occupation to keep them busy all day, I find myself desiring of company. You and I shall have a great many adventures together, especially once the frost comes and we can go skating on the pond outside the vicar’s house of St. Mary’s. Malcom always makes sure to organize a little skating party for the neighborhood children after the first good freeze.”

Lydia gave a very low and proper curtsy to her new benefactors, never lifting her eyes as she spoke. “My lady, I am most humbled and grateful for your generosity. You have a lovely home and I am sure that I shall enjoy any adventure you choose to organize. I know that few would ever be so kind as to take in such a wayward young woman and I shall endeavor to make myself acceptable to your ladyship.”

Lady Gwyneth came over to Lydia and placed one finger under her chin, forcing the young girl to lift her eyes. “Now dear, I meant what I said. I am glad to have you here. I know that most of society would look at the reality of your situation and scorn you in order to make themselves more important, but you shall not find such treatment in this house. I was hated by my siblings and nieces because my father raped my mother during a house party held by my grandfather then was only persuaded to marry her after his first wife finally succumbed to illness. Even my mother hated me because I was a constant reminder that she had been ‘ruined’ by a man nearly three times her age and who outweighed her by more than 50 pounds. The titters of the *ton* called her a harlot for ‘letting’ my father compromise her. In reality she had tried to fight back and screamed for help that did not come while he held her down. Then she was forced to marry him and bear his child. I myself was used ill by a man who never loved me, but only wanted my money. I know that you are a worthy young woman and truly believed that this Mr. Wickham was going to marry you with haste. If he had explained his plan from the beginning, you would have never agreed. You shall find myself and my sons will never speak ill of you for placing your faith in a man with a silver tongue.”

To hear such honesty about the reality of the world was a shock to Lydia. Even Colonel Fitzwilliam was taken aback by the unguarded description of her mother’s life with his Great-Grandfather.

“Well!” exclaimed Geoffrey Fitzwilliam. “Now that we have cleared

the air about who is and is not welcome, let me introduce myself and my brother. I am Geoffrey, the older, more dashing, brother ...”

“And I am Malcom. The two hours younger brother, but likely years older if we counted age by the number of waking hours. As mother said, I am the vicar of St. Mary’s across the street and reside most of the time in the vicar’s house. Geoffrey lives on the family estate about 10 miles from here. He is also affianced to the lovely daughter of the local fish monger. She was unable to join to tonight for diner, but I am sure you shall meet her soon. Josephine is another kind soul who will only wish you well. Lord Matlock and Cousin Richard have always been kind to mother and us, so we are more than happy to repay them through caring for you, Mrs. Wickham. I promise you shall always be safe here in Scarborough.”

There was something very appealing about the young vicar. It wasn’t his looks, as he was not so handsome as some, though not as bad as Mr. Collins. Surely no one would dispute that the older brother, Geoffrey, was the more attractive of the two, but Lydia instantly liked Malcom. She believed it was his eyes. He had clear blue eyes, much like Mr. Darcy, but a softness in his look. It reminded her faintly of the way Lizzie had looked at her that day in the British Museum when she was so enthralled by the statues.

“Thank you Mr. Fitzwilliam. I am sure I shall be happy here as well as safe.”

“All the ‘Mr.’ this, and ‘Mrs.’ that, with a ‘my lady’ sprinkled throughout is beginning to make me feel like we have somehow been transported to Almack’s. Lydia, I insist you call me Gwyneth and my sons by their Christian names while we are at home. We are now family, if not by blood, then by affection and this family never observes formalities in the parlor.”

With the humor of the company restored, they all smiled on the way to the dining room. Lady Gwyneth had planned a beautiful 4 course meal to celebrate the addition to the household and officially welcome their newest ‘family’ member. Richard entertained with stories of his recruits in his irreverent way during the soup and fish courses. Then Geoffrey took hold of the discussion during the meats and vegetables, giving a rowdy account of the misadventures of training his newest stallion which included a severely bruised tailbone and a broken bridle bit.

By the time the pudding was served, Lydia was feeling much more

relaxed and decided to join into the conversation. “Malcom, tell me, are there such humorous tales that come from being responsible for such a fine looking and large church?”

“Alas, Lydia, while there are many stories of a humorous, or frankly bizarre, nature, I cannot tell them as I have taken a vow to never repeat the stories my flock tell me in confidence. I fear the most humorous story I have to tell about running the beautiful St. Mary’s Church is that there is a short statue in dark stone of a praying child near the front of the rectory. As I make the rounds in the morning lighting the wall sconces and the great chandelier, I inevitably bash my knee upon his small, yet very pointy, hands. One of these days I shall remember his presence but nearly 5 years of service as both a young aide to the old vicar and now as the church’s leader have not yet saved my poor knees.”

Laughter rung throughout the finely decorated dining parlor. Lydia decided that she would be quite content with her new situation and was looking forward to Sunday services with such a witty pastor upon the pulpit.

Pemberley, Derbyshire

3 October 1812

Elizabeth Bennet sat at the vanity in her room staring at the wedding ensemble gracing her bed. She had never owned anything so beautiful. It was too much. She would never be able to be simple Lizzie in such a gown. Then again, less than an hour after donning the silk masterpiece she would forever cease to be simple Lizzie and instead become Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, Mistress of Pemberley and Darcy House London, even if only a select few people would know her as such.

Edward and Darcy had conspired to have the wedding dress made for Elizabeth. It was made of fine ivory Chinese silk and trimmed with soft pink Indian ribbon. Lying next to the gown were matching gloves, a new bonnet, silk slippers, and a new warm pelisse. Most of the

material came from Edward's stock and the finished clothes were made by the most exclusive modiste in all of London. Usually women of the *ton* have to wait six weeks to get an appointment in her Bond street establishment, but she has always lived in Cheapside and gets much of her most exclusive fabrics from Gardiner Imports.

Madame Devy was born and raised in England but played up her French heritage, and even exaggerated her accent, for the expectations of the *ton*. She really did speak French fluently as both of her parents came to live in England from France before the blasted wars had separated them from their families, and French was the language spoken around the dinner table of her home. But Mme. Devy had never even been more than 25 miles from London, let alone to the continent. Monsieur Devy had been a gentleman's tailor and his wife had made elaborate costumes for the theatres, so sewing was in Mme. Devy's blood. Her parents had such renowned reputations for their work as clothiers in London that even upon her marriage, nearly 15 years ago, Mme. Devy had kept her maiden name. Privately she was a simple Englishwoman, Mrs. Daniel Holsclow, wife to a respectable barrister. But to the world of fashion, she was Mme. Devy, the French Modiste with the most exclusive address.

Her parents had bought the house next to Mr. Gardiner, Sr. only a few years after coming to London and quickly become friends then business associates with the gruff old tradesman. The Devy and Gardiner children had all played together when they were young and Mme. Devy was very fond of her old friends. Fanny Gardiner had married a gentleman and moved into the country, then her sister had met and married the town solicitor near her husband's estate, but Edward Gardiner stayed in the family home and continued to run the family business. Mme. Devy's brother had taken a position as a footman with a respectable family many years ago and was now the Butler to a great house near Kensington. So Mme. Devy and her family lived in the house her parents bought all those years ago next door to the Gardiners. Now that Mme. Devy was one of the most sought after dress makers in all of England and Edward Gardiner was among the largest importers of fine fabrics, their family's business relationship was invaluable.

And they were still friends.

Mme. Devy has made every evening dress Madeline Gardiner has ever owned since becoming Edward's bride. She has also made one dress a year for each of Fanny's daughters as well as a multitude of outfits for dolls over the years. Now Edward's own daughter was moving from

wanting dolly dresses to outfits appropriate for a young woman.

Edward approached Mme. Devy on the day of Darcy and Elizabeth's engagement with some absolutely flawless bolts of silk and asked for a favor. From just the measurements on the paper on top, no fittings, could she make her most fashionable gown with matching gloves ready for pick-up in 5 days? When the seasoned dressmaker looked at the measurements, she knew that they were for Miss Lizzie. She remembers every lady for which she has ever made a dress and could readily identify women she worked for often by their measurements alone. Also, she was nearly positive that the quality of the material and the cut of the dress made this her wedding costume. While she desperately wanted to comment on these observations, something inside her said to trust her oldest friend's reasons for secrecy and never breathe a word of her suspicions to anyone.

So, Mme. Devy pulled her two most talented seamstresses off of other orders and had them work full time on the most beautiful gown she had ever constructed. There was no fabric in all of London to be its equal and she was sure Miss Lizzie would look like an angel come to earth while wearing the masterpiece. After the gown and gloves were finished, she had some time to construct a matching bonnet with a narrow brim, just the way Miss Lizzie prefers, and a pair of delicate silk slippers. Finally, Mme. Devy took some blush colored muslin she had from a certain lady of the *ton* who was forever bringing too much fabric for her orders and insisting the rest be discarded, and constructed a lightweight, but warm, pelisse. It matched the design of the dress and the color of the Indian trim perfectly. The inside of the coat was lined with a good quality grey wool to guard against the harsh winters of Derbyshire where Mme. Devy had heard that the young miss was reportedly taking a position as companion to the debuting Miss Darcy.

In addition to the outfit, the young attendant girl who worked in the front room of Mme.'s bond street establishment had taken it upon herself to use the remnants from the gown and pelisse to construct finely embroidered ladies handkerchiefs. Another young seamstress had made a new set of small clothes and a chemise from the softest thin silk they had in stock. Finally, Mme. Devy constructed a simple yet elegant nightgown and dressing gown out of the last yards of the silk bolt. If this was indeed to be Miss Lizzie's wedding outfit, Mme. Devy wanted to give her favorite Bennet sister truly wonderful garments in which to say her vows and then take her place in her husband's bed. Mme. Devy thought it was a final presentation worthy of a grand Duchess and perfect for the beautiful and kind Miss Lizzie.

Connor had retrieved multiple boxes from the dressmaker's home on the very hour he left London for Derbyshire. Obtaining a special license usually took between 3 and 5 days from application to issuance, so Darcy had left his valet behind to retrieve their important items and join the household as soon as possible. He came rolling into the drive of Pemberley late in the day on the 30th with a carriage full of boxes and important documents from Darcy's solicitor. Connor had kept the special license in an inside pocket of his jacket during the entire trip. When he stopped to sleep at traveling inns along the way, he had placed his jacket below his head to ensure that no one was able to have access to the most important piece of paper in his master's entire life.

Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lydia had left for Scarborough on 1 October and should be arriving at their destination in time for dinner today. After the last of their relations were gone, Darcy and Elizabeth had taken Georgiana into the master's study, locked the door, and revealed their plan to marry in just two days' time.

"Truly brother?! You are going to marry Miss Elizabeth and not just bring her to the household as my companion? How Wonderful!" Georgiana nearly toppled her chair in her haste to embrace first her brother then Elizabeth. *"William I could not be happier to know that we shall be a family. No matter what façade must be presented to protect Miss Elizabeth's sisters from society's ridiculous gossip, at home we three shall be a true family."*

Elizabeth smiled as she remembered the joy in Georgie's eyes in the study. If her new sister had no reservations, why was she feeling so unsure all of a sudden?

A knock from her dressing room door told Elizabeth that the bath Marianne promised was ready.

Marianne Marshall had been a wonderful new addition to the household. Elizabeth was introduced to the young woman in London the day before they all had left for Hertfordshire. Marianne was told by Colonel Fitzwilliam that she would be an upstairs maid and prepare the young miss's companion for her important social gatherings but upon removing to the Darcy's employ she learned that the position was as Elizabeth's exclusive ladies maid. It seemed a tad strange to Marianne that Mr. Darcy would hire an abigail for another of his employees, but she had been brought up her entire life not to question the Fitzwilliams or say anything to anyone that could violate the family's trust. During the ride to Derbyshire, she again found it

odd that Elizabeth and her sister, the very young and pregnant widow of the former Pemberley steward's son, rode with the Darcys and Colonel Fitzwilliam in the family's carriage instead in the servants' carriage with her and her mother. The final oddity proved too much for the quiet young maid. When Elizabeth was given a large suite of rooms in the family wing that connected to the rooms that Miss Darcy had always occupied, Marianne went to her great-aunt and asked if such treatment was common for a paid companion.

Mrs. Reynolds said flatly that it was not but if Marianne wanted to stay with the Pemberley staff she would make no other inquiries about the Darcys' personal decisions. All information about the family was to stay inside her lips, not venture forth where anyone could overhear. Not 2 days later, after the carriage taking her mother, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and the young widow back to the beautiful seaside town had gone past the bridge near the park gate, Mrs. Reynolds called together all of the inside house staff and the head grounds staff for an important meeting.

"I have some wonderful news. We shall be having a wedding here on 3 October. Mr. Darcy is going to wed Miss Elizabeth Bennet by special license in a private ceremony presided over by the new vicar and celebrated at the Pemberley family chapel. This day also happens to be our new Mistress's 21st birthday. I will have a special breakfast prepared to commemorate the wedding and a cake for the lady's birthday. The ceremony will not include any of Miss Elizabeth's family, but her uncle, and guardian, has signed the marriage settlement making the event fully legal and joyously anticipated by the Bennet family.

"For reasons that I will not share generally, the Darcys wish for this marriage to be a secret from society for at least through the next London Season, even from certain members of Mr. Darcy's family including Lord Matlock, Lady Catherine, and the Fitzwilliam Cousins. When there are visitors in the house, Mr. Darcy and his new wife will play the part of employer and employee. Additionally, Miss Elizabeth has been given a set of rooms adjoining with Miss Darcy's suite for when the Mistress cannot occupy her rightful chambers. This situation will become more permanent when the family removes to London since the Darcys will have many more situations where they will need to pretend that they are not married.

"I am relying on each of you to protect them. We must not let one word of this slip to anyone, especially our own family members who serve the Fitzwilliams or de Bourghs. If servants from other employ are asking questions about the family, shun them and report it to me so that I may warn Mr. and Mrs. Darcy about the person trying to snoop. I shall

entertain no questions, nor will I tolerate anyone speaking of this at all. We shall now go about our lives as if the family's situation were one observed every day."

Since that moment, absolutely no one had spoken a word, even to each other, about the abnormality of the Darcy's marriage, especially not Marianne. She had taken a moment to digest that she was now the Head Ladies Maid of Pemberley. Personal servant to the soon to be Mistress of the house and she reported to no one except the Mistress and Master. She was a young girl of only 19 and had only ever played ladies maid to a few female visitors who came to the Fitzwilliam's Scarborough estate. Her total experience consisted of a handful of days that could be counted without utilizing her toes. Panic had begun to build inside her at the prospect of serving this new lady.

Though many of the servants at Pemberley were related to Marianne either by blood or marriage, she had met only a few in her lifetime. Being secluded in the north caring for the "black sheep" of the Fitzwilliam family, of whom she was actually very fond, meant that she had not spent much time visiting with the extended members of the Grayson and Walker families. She had met her second cousins; Jonny, Connor, and Lilian; when they were all quite young during a large gathering of the extended Fitzwilliam family to mourn the death of the former Lord Matlock. Since the number of guests coming to witness the old Earl's burial and the new Earl's installment had been quite extensive, servants from all of the Fitzwilliam holdings as well as some servants from nearby Pemberley had come to help with the arrangements. Many of the children of the visiting servants had stayed together in one of the larger Matlock servant's houses so that the older children could keep an eye on the younger while their parents saw to the family and their guests. Marianne and Lilian had become quite fond of each other during that trip and continued to exchange letters frequently.

After Mrs. Reynolds dismissed them to their duties, Marianne fled the servants' quarters to find her cousin. Lilian was ladies maid to Miss Georgiana Darcy and would know what to do.

Both Lilian and Mrs. Reynolds had been extremely supportive of Marianne in the last 3 days and had spent many hours teaching her where everything in the house could be located. But Marianne had been terrified of offending her new mistress and had said hardly one word to Miss Elizabeth while performing her duties. Finally, Elizabeth could take it no more.

“Marianne, are you unhappy here at Pemberley? I know it is a long way from your family, but I hope you know that you will be able to visit them if you wish and if this situation is too much, you will be welcomed back into Lady Gwyneth’s employ until a position that you prefer can be secured for you.”

“Oh No my lady! I am perfectly happy here. I just have very little experience being the personal servant to such a grand lady and would not want you to suffer from my mistakes.”

“Well, I’m certainly no grand lady, that honor I will reserve for Mr. Darcy’s Aunt, Lady Catherine, and similarly, I have little experience with having a personal servant. So far, we are equals. You may relax for you shall not offend me in any way, I’m sure. Perhaps we shall learn how to navigate this new life together.”

Since speaking so frankly the morning prior, their subsequent interactions have been much easier. They even giggled together while Elizabeth dressed for dinner last night over the mess of tangles that was under her bonnet. This morning, when Elizabeth had come back from breakfast to change for the wedding, Marianne was laying out her new outfit and simply effusive over the fineness of the silk. She had asked Elizabeth who had made such a wonder and the stunned young bride could not even begin to guess.

It was now Elizabeth’s turn to panic.

How in the world did she think she was worthy to be Mrs. Darcy? How was she going to fit into this world of wealth and responsibility? How was she ever going to put on that fabulous dress, which probably cost more than her usual annual allowance and then some? Marianne calmed her mistress by reminding Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy could have married any one of the titled, dowered, and perfectly snobbish women of the *ton* if he cared one bit about such nonsense. But he didn’t. He had chosen a delightful young woman from a good gentleman’s family with character and wit because he loved her. Lady Gwyneth had always been going on about how the persons of the *ton*, and especially the women, were not to be trusted and only ever looked out for themselves. It was a much better thing to be born in the country and live a simple, happy life. Then Marianne had scurried out of the room saying that a bride deserved pampering before the ceremony, so a nice hot bath with some rose water was just the thing. Elizabeth had sat down at her vanity to take down her hair while Marianne had the bath readied but got stuck staring at the fine ensemble on the bed. Maybe after her bath she would feel more herself.

Elizabeth soaked in the tub until the water became too cool to continue. Marianne helped her thoroughly wash her long dark hair, then produced a soft, small pillow to place on the edge of the tub for her head. Her hair was pulled over the edge to drip dry while she relaxed. After she got out of the bath, Marianne brought in fire heated towels to finish drying her hair and some large tin rollers to make nice, manageable curls. Just as the final pins were going into her incredible coiffure, there was a knock at the door connecting her rooms to Georgiana's. Elizabeth bid her soon to be sister enter and welcomed the young lady with a soft smile.

"Hello Lizzie, I hope I am not interrupting your preparations but I wanted to give you these things before you finalized your dress for the ceremony." Georgiana presented Elizabeth with the most beautiful jewelry set of natural pearls comprising a necklace, bracelet, and earrings. The tears Elizabeth had been trying to keep in since seeing her new dress finally started to build in her eyes. Georgiana became worried that Lizzie was somehow offended by her offering.

"You certainly do not have to wear them today if you would rather not, but they are rightfully yours to do with as you please. They have been in the Darcy family for 4 generations. Usually, the Mistress of the house presents them to her son's bride on the morning of their wedding, but since my mother is not with us to perform the honor, I have come. Each new Mistress has added to the set just before giving them to her new daughter-in-law. The original stock of pearls was obtained in India by my great-grandfather when he went as a young man with the East Indian Company. He made the necklace as an engagement gift for my great-grandmother and gave her the rest of the pearls to do with what she wished. When my grandfather became engaged to my grandmother, Great-Grandmother had matching earrings made and gifted the set to the new bride. Similarly, my grandmother had the bracelet made for my mother. Unfortunately, I have not had time to make anything new for the set to be ready for today, but I sent one of the largest left in the stock to our jeweler in London and commissioned a ring as your wedding present."

Elizabeth was now crying in earnest. "Sweet Georgie, of course I would be honored to wear your ancestor's pearls on the day I join their ranks as Mistress of Pemberley. I am sorry to distress you with my tears, but I cannot imagine the expense that you and your brother have gone to for my attire today. The dress waiting for me is of such a quality that I have never seen its equal and wonder how I shall ever be worthy of all you and William have given me."

Kneeling beside the vanity chair, Georgiana took Elizabeth's hands and looked imploringly into her eyes. "Lizzie, William is incredibly lucky to have become worthy of your affections. We have lived a life full of privilege envied by many in society, but none of the money that pays for fine clothes or precious jewels has ever made either of us happy. My happiest moments are of sitting in my mother's rose garden while my father or William read me a simple child's book. Our money could not save my mother from the dangers of childbirth or bring my father back after suffering a stroke. My aunt Catherine has lived her life in pursuit of nothing but rank and money. She has always been miserable, suffering marriage to a man she hated with no real friends to which she could turn for compassion. These trinkets, they are nothing compared to the worth of your gift. You have brought joy back into this massive, empty house. There are many days I wish we lived as many of the respectable gentry instead of paragons of *le bon ton*. Then no one would try to use us ill for their own financial gains."

Another knock at the door brought all three young women gathered around Elizabeth's vanity out of their silent thoughts. When Marianne opened the door, Mrs. Reynolds was revealed carrying a small wrapped package. She asked Georgiana and Marianne to allow herself and Elizabeth some time alone while the bride finished her preparations. Georgiana went back to her own toilette and Marianne went to help the downstairs maids complete arrangements for the wedding breakfast.

Mrs. Reynolds placed the package on Elizabeth's vanity and said that it was a gift from Mr. Darcy. Shaking her head at the generosity of her new family, Elizabeth joked; "How is it that there could be anything else I need? He has already procured me this extraordinary dress and Georgia has just now given me the Darcy family pearls. I do not know what else is left to be given unless he has a miniature tiger as my new pet wrapped in that box."

"While I cannot say for sure what is inside the box, I'm sure it isn't some kind of animal. And my dear, your uncle Gardiner was the one to procure the wedding costume. Mr. Darcy did ask him if he knew of anyone in London who could make a dress for you for today, but I believe that the material came from your uncle's warehouse and the dress maker was one of your uncle's friends."

"You mean that Mrs. Holsclow made this dress for me?! She has made many of my best dresses over the year, and I know she is a highly sought after modiste of the *ton* operating her business under her maiden name, but I have never seen something so wonderful! I wish I

could thank her, but it would raise too many questions. I shall have to write to my uncle and ask him to pass along my thanks if he believes it would not jeopardize our situation.”

“I am sure you shall get your chance dear, Miss Darcy and you shall be having your season wardrobe made by Mme. Devy upon your return to London. The appointment has been made already since she is notoriously difficult to get into in advance of the season. But now I believe you should open this beautifully wrapped box.”

Inside lay a beautiful silver hair comb with mother of pearl inlaid. There was a note also.

My dearest Elizabeth, this was my mother's favorite hair comb. I remember her wearing it to the most important social functions and always on my parent's wedding anniversary. I hope you love it as much as she did. Happy Birthday Dearest, I shall dream of all the future birthdays we shall share while I await your entrance into the church.

Elizabeth asked Mrs. Reynolds if she could place the comb into her curls. It was luminous against her dark hair. The motherly housekeeper then helped Elizabeth into the rest of her clothes. At 10 minutes to 11:00am, the bride was ready to proceed to the chapel just two floors below. Before turning to leave, Mrs. Reynolds gave Elizabeth one last parting gift. “Miss Elizabeth, I know you have come here to marry without your mother or any close female relation to prepare you for this event. I must say you have handled all of this with aplomb and grace. Now I shall ask your indulgence for my imprudent words, but tonight should be a joyous joining. There may be some discomfort at first, but trust Mr. Darcy to guide you and be gentle. He is a good man as his father was before him. It is a much better thing to perform your wifely duty with a man who loves you.”

With no more words to be said, Elizabeth walked out the door, down the stairs, and to the entrance of the Darcy family chapel. Once the vicar was in his place, Mrs. Reynolds opened the double doors and the ceremony joining Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet as man and wife began.

Chapter 10: A Peaceful Winter

Chapter Summary

Elizabeth and William find some quiet time to reflect on their first months as husband and wife as well as the challenges they face returning to Town.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Pemberley, Derbyshire

13 March 1813

Today is 7 months to the day since Mr. Bennet died. Elizabeth thought of her father often, but not in true sadness. He had lived a simple life full of mirth and always enjoyed laughing at the folly of himself and his fellow man. Elizabeth believed that the worst offence she could commit against her father's memory would be to grow despondent and forget to laugh. So she had always tried to remember his wit then laugh at something he would have found amusing. Today though, she was very sad.

An express rider had arrived while the family was at their breakfast bringing news of Lydia's delivery. A fine, stout baby boy was safely delivered on 11 March 1813. Both mother and son are recovering well and will be churched by Malcom Fitzwilliam in 2 Sundays. Lydia named her son Thomas Anthony Bennet Wickham in remembrance of their father. Seeing her father's name written in Lady Gwyneth's loopy scrawl brought tears to Elizabeth's fine, dark eyes.

If someone was being named in his memory, he was truly gone.

Thomas Anthony Bennet had a grandson he would never meet. There will never be another new book lovingly selected by her father for her specific enjoyment. And one day when she is hopefully blessed with children, they will never know the gentle humor of the man who never took himself too seriously. Today, it hurt so much.

After breakfast, William persuaded Elizabeth to go on a ride around the estate to take her mind off of her recent losses. They meandered

through the wooded park and ended up at a beautiful grove by the river where they would often stop for an impromptu picnic and to rest the horses. This morning was cool with the lingering winds of winter, but sunny and bright to remind the couple that spring was finally upon them. They sat in the stillness and watched the sun play on the surface of the water, each lost to thoughts about their first 6 months of marriage.

Life at Pemberley together has been joyous. After their wedding, William had taken Elizabeth to a secluded property owned by the Darcys but currently without a leaseholder. The house was moderately sized, about as big as Longbourn, charmingly decorated, and situated on a beautiful lake below one of the mountains in the peak district. They took a handful of maids, their personal servants, an under cook, and two footmen, then left the rest of the world behind. For 3 weeks it was just the two of them and the reduced staff living in their secluded haven. Every morning they slept late and took breakfast in their rooms. By mid-day they would emerge to find an unexplored footpath with a basket for luncheon. Tea was almost always taken outside on the verandah that directly overlooked the lake and dinner was never formal. Their evenings consisted of an ongoing chess match and discussing their favorite books. Then William would always beg Elizabeth to play for him at least one song before they retired.

Upon their return home, William had to attend to the final arraignments for the harvest plus any winter sales from their livestock and Elizabeth had to take on the responsibility of running the household, but these were only minor interruptions to the family's time of bonding. Most of their days were spent in much the same way their honeymoon had been, but with the added companionship of Georgiana. The three Darcys started a chess tournament where the previous night's two losers would play each other to see who would play the previous winner for the daily title. More often than not, the siblings would be battling for a spot to challenge Elizabeth's superior skills. There was also a plethora of quality music from both ladies and occasionally from William on the upright cello he had learned as a younger man. One night near Christmas, Georgiana tuned her harp, and all three played at once to some lovely carols.

Even though she was never going to be a great horsewoman, William and Georgiana taught Elizabeth to ride so she could travel to many of the places on the Pemberley estate which were only accessible from horseback. William acquired a beautiful white mare, almost as tall as Incitatus, and just as recognizable, for Elizabeth to ride. She gave the horse the name Saphēda, meaning 'white' in Hindi, after an elephant

by the same name in the tale of an East India Co. militia man's adventures on the subcontinent. The book had been one of the last purchases her father had made before his death and Elizabeth had brought the tome with her on her northern tour with the Gardiners. It seemed a fitting name for her new friend. William and Elizabeth had taken their chromatically opposed horses on romantic rides through the Pemberley woods and beyond to the many sights of the Peak within an hours ride from the house. Once the first frost came about, William had hitched both Incitatus and Saphēda up to the Darcy family winter sleigh and took Elizabeth around the estate on sweet sleigh rides.

It became impossible to completely ignore the Darcys' relations so close to the holidays, especially the Countess of Matlock. Lady Josephine Fitzwilliam, the Honorable Countess of Matlock, was not a woman to be trifled with. She cared deeply about her orphaned nephew and niece and wanted them to make wonderful matches. William, in her opinion, was getting to old to be a bachelor any longer and Georgiana could only benefit from a quality woman coming into the household. With matchmaking for all of the wayward unmarried Fitzwilliam boys in mind, Lady Matlock organized a holiday party with some of her closest relations and friends. Since Pemberley was no more than a two hour carriage ride from the Matlock estate, William and Georgiana could not decline the invitation. The Earls of Derby and Nottingham were also invited along with their families. Lady Matlock was sister to Lord Nottingham and cousin to Lady Derby. Both men had an unmarried daughter with a substantial dowry for William and her son, Richard, to consider as well as unmarried sons if Georgiana was so inclined.

So, all three Darcys had packed their bags in late November for a visit to Matlock. The entire affair had been very formal and Elizabeth was given rooms in the servant's quarters even over Georgiana's unusual protest that her companion be closer to her own rooms. William was mortified that she was being treated with so little respect but Elizabeth reminded him quietly that she was supposed to be a paid employee of the family and most companions did not reside in the family wing of the house. She persuaded him to consider their four day trip a short practice session for the coming London season.

In addition to the strained sleeping arraignments, both the young ladies of marriageable age had decided they would not mind being Mrs. Darcy one bit.

Lady Fiona Finch, daughter to the Earl of Nottingham, Lady Matlock's

favorite niece, and heiress to £50,000 was going into her 5th season. At 22, she was tired of dancing with spendthrift dandies and impoverished lordlings at Almack's. Mr. Darcy was certainly not a spendthrift and managed to be handsome without wearing a cravat that had so many knots it looked like seaman's worst nightmare. She was friendly with Caroline Bingley and knew that lady considered herself practically engaged to Mr. Darcy, but where was she now? If Lady Matlock was excluding the Bingley's from such an intimate gathering, then the reports of Caroline and Mr. Darcy's "understanding" must be greatly exaggerated by the upstart. Lady Fiona decided that she would use her close relationship with her aunt to secure more time with the ultimately eligible Mr. Darcy.

Lady Miranda Stanley, daughter to the Earl of Derby, was only out in society this past summer. Barely a woman at 18, she had been friends with Georgiana since they were young girls. Several autumns during their youth, the two had spent much time together while their fathers would gather for the hunt. The last time they had all been together was during Mr. Darcy's final year at Cambridge, the year before the elder Mr. Darcy passed. Lady Miranda was only 12 and Mr. Darcy 22, but she instantly developed a crush on her friend's tall, handsome brother. The crush turned into adoration when Master Fitzwilliam Darcy had come to the nursery to 'rescue' his sister and her playmate from their lessons to go fly kites. Nearly 6 years later the feelings had not faded. Last season, Lady Miranda had been able to secure several dances with Mr. Darcy at both Almack's and Matlock House but her native shyness combined with his general social unease made for silent encounters. As she watched Lady Fiona make conversation with the handsome man, Lady Miranda decided that this spring she would be bold. She had just as much dowry money and connections as the Nottinghams. Besides, Mr. Darcy always looked anxious when talking to the Lady Fiona. Lady Miranda understood his desire for quite company. She was sure that, given the choice between the two women his aunt was advocating, she would be Mrs. Miranda Darcy before the fall.

Mercifully the visit was not long enough for either lady to become too familiar with William or place him in any awkward positions, despite Lady Fiona's most concerted efforts. Part of their failures was Richard's constant post at Darcy's side. He had taken up such a position in order to shield his cousin from his mother's matchmaking attempts. While Richard did not know about Darcy and Elizabeth's current state of matrimony, he still had hope that his serious cousin would get his head out of his horse's arse and marry the outstanding lady. The longing looks shared between the two was an indication that

their mutual devotion had survived the tragedies of last summer. Perhaps, once Georgie was well settled, Richard would strongly suggest Darcy forget the gossips and marry his lady love. But for that to be a possibility, he would have to keep the matchmakers at bay and watch diligently for attempts for force William's hand. His cousin Fiona could be fierce when she wanted, and Richard did not trust her.

When the party was departing, Lady Matlock issued another round of mandatory invitations to Christmas Eve. This time the invitation did not even include Elizabeth since the Countess assumed that she would be spending her holiday week with family. Instead of confront his aunt in company, Darcy went to his uncle to say that in no way would Georgiana be returning without her companion since Miss Elizabeth did not have plans to be away from Derbyshire during the holiday. Lord Matlock was a bit confused by the forceful way Darcy spoke on the matter, but Richard again intervened on his cousin's behalf. He said that they absolutely understood and of course Miss Elizabeth should not be alone on Christmas. Georgie's particular friend would always be welcome at Matlock. He also went on to say that she would most defiantly be given rooms adjacent to Georgie on her next visit considering that, besides technically being an employee, she was such a close friend to Georgie, Darcy, and Richard.

Thankfully a massive snow storm three days before Christmas had made travel to Matlock impossible. This allowed the new family to have a peaceful and private holiday. Instead of having to pretend again that Elizabeth was just Georgie's companion, Mr. and Mrs. Darcy slept in late in their massive bed and enjoyed the holiday as all newlyweds should. They then exchanged personal presents over hot chocolate and sweet rolls in their private sitting room. After attending church, the family retired to the library to exchange gifts. While this seemed perfectly innocent to Elizabeth, Georgiana was confused why the presents were in the Library instead of by the wooden crèche in the east parlor like always. When she was about to comment on the oddity, William raised his finger to her lips out of sight of Elizabeth and silently implored his baby sister to just play along.

William had a specific purpose for hosting Christmas in the Library instead of the east parlor

When Elizabeth walked into the Library she was curious about a new set of stacks positioned by the windows on the north side of the room. It was clearly newly constructed, as it had not been there just yesterday, and not quite full. She went over to investigate but nearly fell to the floor when she realized what the shelves contained.

Mr. Bennet's books! Nearly every single one.

She knew instantly that they were his because her father had placed a small etched 'B' into the leather on the spine of every book he had ever owned. She ran her fingers along the small indented letters and wept.

William had purchased many of the most beloved books of Mr. Bennet's collection after the ever industrious and intelligent Mrs. Charlotte Collins had sent a letter to Elizabeth warning of Mr. Collins's desire to rid the house of all the "immoral" books. He was going to burn them! Elizabeth had been distraught over the news. William told her not to fret, he would contact the Meryton book seller immediately and tell the man of the travesty about to take place. Hopefully Mr. Collins would consider his pocket book before the general morality of the Meryton populace.

In reality, William wrote to Mr. Collins directly speaking of his desire to purchase many of the most collectable books, having heard of the quality from Miss Elizabeth and knowing his inclination to rid Longbourn of many in the collection. Darcy had his London solicitor go to Longbourn and pay Mr. Collins a good sum for any of the books he wished to sell. While most would have considered the amount paid for a country squire's book collection insanity, upon inspection, William realized he had paid well under what the books were worth. Along with the expected classics from his days at Oxford, Mr. Bennet had first editions of most of Wadsworth's poems as well as Mrs. Radcliff's novels. There was also a rare specimen of the Elliot Bible, the only modern book translated into the language of the native peoples in the Americas, in fantastic condition. One would think that a clergy man would not have parted with a version of the Bible, but since Mr. Collins was truly not very educated, he did not know what the book was, only that it was written in the language of the godless American natives.

The collection's most valuable piece by far was *Fugitive Pieces*, a poem written by Lord Byron at the age of 14 but recalled due to the sexual imagery. There were only 5 copies known to have survived the burning. One each at Queen's College Oxford Library, Magdalene College Cambridge Library, St. Andrews Library, University of Bologna Library in Italy, and the Sorbonne. Several additional copies were believed to have survived in the hands of private collectors who managed to purchase a copy within the short time it was for sale around Nottinghamshire and in a few exclusive book stores in London, but none had before been confirmed. William was amazed to find it

amongst Mr. Bennet's books. That one edition alone at a private auction in London could fetch the entire sum William paid Mr. Collins, likely more. But these were not purchased for their investment value, they were purchased to make Elizabeth smile.

She was overwhelmed by such a gesture and could not believe that her husband had gone to such expense to save her father's life's work. Nothing, not even a whole library full of new copies of the books her father had owned, could compare to actually having the volumes his hands had lovingly caressed while enjoying their contents. She could smell his favorite tobacco in the pages and see the actual marks he had made in the margins. It was as if he were here, teaching her again about what was most important to remember or what was silly so should be taken with a grain of salt. She could hear his voice as he would give her something new to read, telling her that books were the gateway to true understanding of the world.

Many snowy days between Christmas and the spring thaw, Elizabeth could be found curled up in an overstuffed chair she had moved in between the stack containing her father's books and the window. She wanted to read every word from every book that had been so adored by her dear father.

The ongoing snow made it impossible for many of the Darcy's neighbors to come calling and even stopped the royal mail service for over a month in January and February. When news of the outside world did make it to Pemberley, it included assurances from both Charles and Edward that it seems London generally believes Lydia's fake marriage story as well as accepts Darcy's investments as the reason for his involvement. Even Lady Catherine wrote her nephew and agreed that an elopement is certainly scandalous, but the couple did go to church without any bribery by her family. She decided that the young widow is to be pitied rather than scorned. Combined with the generally favorable impression of Miss Jane Bennet's serene beauty, none of the upper crust were gossiping about the Darcy's new gentil employee.

Now, the spring flowers are blooming and the planning is soon to be underway. After the planning is complete, they will all travel to London for the early season. Both Georgiana and Elizabeth would need new gowns for the social calendar of a debutant and they needed to get to Bond Street earlier than the returning flock of ladies in the marriage market or they might have to wait out half the season. The modiste in Matlock was adequate for several of the morning and day dresses both needed and each lady had commissioned two evening

gowns plus one ball gown in order to have something with which to start off the season. But gowns of the finest silk, only found in London, would be required for many of the fashionable dinners and balls held by the peerage. Additionally, Georgie would need a special court gown for her presentation. Amazingly, or perhaps not so amazing given her long friendship with Elizabeth's family, Mme. Devy had given the ladies an appointment on one of the first days after their planned return date. She would provide several ball gowns, a bevy of evening dinner gowns, and, in Elizabeth's opinion, an absurd number of day calling dresses. In addition to all the dresses, they would be getting new gloves, boots, slippers, shawls, bonnets, and even new corsets to fit the lower cut of this year's fashionable neckline. Such expense for a mere 9 weeks in Town was previously unimaginable to Elizabeth but this was the expectation of *le bon ton*. Georgiana could not appear to be dressed below her station or she could be shunned by Almack's patronesses and gossiped about in the ladies calling parlors.

Such a poor first season could seriously degrade her prospects. In truth, William was beginning to worry more about his sister making a good match with a man she loved than with a man of wealth, but he could not rid himself of the fear she would again be duped by someone after only her money.

Marriage to Elizabeth had been more wonderful than he had even dreamed. She was kind, compassionate, intelligent, and always appreciated his presence. Their intimate relationship was fulfilling to both and exceeded either's expectations. William was beginning to understand why his father always insisted that the joy of loving his mother was worth all of the pain caused by her untimely death. Even if Elizabeth were to be taken from him this moment, he would live the rest of his life with the memories of her love, unsurpassed by any other joy. William longed for his sister to be similarly situated. The question that would sometimes keep him awake at night was how to ensure she found it.

He would just have to be ever diligent in his vetting of any young man who came to call and trust Elizabeth's judgment. William also resolved to call upon Richard to dig into any suitor's reputation. His cousin was a man uniquely skilled at discrete inquiry.

Both husband and wife sat quietly in their picturesque haven in the Pemberley woods with similar thoughts of dread for the upcoming season.

The real test of their plan to salvage the Bennet family would

commence upon their arrival in Town. Neither knew how difficult it would be to go back to being merely Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy when the last few months of being Elizabeth and William have been the happiest in both of their lives. They will have to be especially careful with their public interactions, reducing any inadvertent touching or discussions held at too close a distance. Georgiana had also brought up the fact that they should begin to school their facial expressions now in order to avoid anyone overseeing the near constant devotion that shone forth from their eyes. They wouldn't want anyone to question the nature of their relationship. It was relatively common for paid governesses and companions to be taken by the mater of the house as a mistress. No one would really bat an eye at such a rumor. But it would complicate the situation and possibly cause a re-opening of gossip surrounding her sister's tenuous "marriage" to Wickham. Additionally, once the fact of their marriage did come into general knowledge, no one would believe that they had been married prior to Elizabeth's supposed employment and she would forever be branded a mistress, elevated beyond her station. No, they must be above reproach in their public interactions.

At least it would be fairly uncommon for the Darcy's to entertain at home beyond the weekly day of staying home to callers. Since Georgiana was just a debutant and there was no recognized mistress of the house, Darcy would not host any formal dinner parties at their home. All of the entertaining in honor of Georgie would be done at Matlock House with the Earl and Countess acting as hosts. Hopefully the family could reduce the number of visitors inside their private walls to a bare minimum necessary to be polite in order to enjoy some peace in the evenings. Their biggest challenges would be the matchmaking efforts of Lady Matlock and Miss Caroline Bingley calling with her brother as a self-proclaimed close friend to Georgie. William was already planning to suggest he and Charles meet most days at the men's club so that Caroline could not follow. He was currently at a loss as to what to do about his aunt. Perhaps Elizabeth would have some ideas or even Richard, though he would have to be careful not to reveal too much to his cousin.

Just 3 months and with any luck then they could return to their haven in Derbyshire for an indefinite period of time.

Chapter End Notes

While *Fugitive Pieces* is a real poem by the 14 year old Lord Byron that was recalled for sexual content, I made up the supposed number and locations of any surviving copies.

Chapter 11: Determination

Chapter Summary

The Darcys' friends and relations contemplate their individual goals for the upcoming season.

Wilton Row, Belgravia, London

1 April 1813

Sitting upon her chaise lounge and watching the elite of London make their way to Hyde Park, Caroline Bingley was feeling dreary. The day was bright, beckoning most Londoners to head out of doors to enjoy the first temperate day of the spring. But Caroline preferred to stay inside and silently mock her fellow city dwellers, the rich and the poor who had no proper country estate in which to escape London's sleet and smog. She was resolved that she would not be amongst them for much longer. Unfortunately, to top off the insult of London's weather, her entire winter social schedule had been an absolute waste.

Mr. Darcy and Georgiana had spent the entirety of the winter months in Derbyshire without one trip to Town or invitation for the Bingleys to Pemberley. Usually Darcy would invite Charles and Reginald for a country hunt in early November, year before last being the exception due to Charles taking Netherfield. But this past November there wasn't even an apologetic letter telling Charles why the Darcy's were indisposed to host their friends. It was absolutely maddening.

London society was no better either. There was no true upper level society anywhere to be seen. Only second sons and recently ascended tradesmen, like Bingley himself, could be found in the dance halls and theaters of Town. Even many of the elderly Dowagers with whom Caroline or Louise were friendly had taken their winters at their son's estates instead of staying in London.

As if being forced to dance with second sons studying at London University to become a barrister or clergyman wasn't dreadful enough, she had to spread the ridiculous lie about Lydia Bennet being married to George Wickham in order to save her brother's and Mr. Darcy's investment with the uncle from Cheapside. It was revolting to have to repeat the little harlot's name in public and hope that the useless

persons abandoned in London for the winter would repeat the gossip to their more important family members. She was sick from her bright red hair to her perfectly proportioned toes with being complimentary of the Bennets generally and compassionate toward Lydia specifically.

But the nail in the coffin of this winter had been all of the questions circling about Miss Darcy's new social companion. *Was she really quite beautiful? What of her manners? Mr. Darcy must be quite taken with the woman if he has entrusted his baby sister to her care.* And again, Caroline had to skate the line of politely pointing out Eliza's faults but appearing as if she approved of the lady overall.

At least that little chit was now so low as to be unmarriedable by any man of land or wealth. To think, a lowly paid companion, and to Georgiana no less! She may be in Mr. Darcy's household, but she is forever beyond the reach of any gentleman of consequence. Caroline mused that it was unlikely Eliza even spent any time in Mr. Darcy's company. Sure, a social companion would be expected to attend her lady during social dinners and while receiving callers, but when it was just the family, most would spend their time with the other upper level staff. Eliza has likely been more in the company of Mrs. Reynolds than Georgiana and Darcy this past winter. She probably has her rooms in the servant's wing!

She may appear in society next season with finely cut gowns of quality silk, but putting rouge on a sow does not make her a lady.

Another minor worry had been Charles's frequent visits to Cheapside. He went in order to keep an eye on Mr. Gardiner and the investments made by the Bingleys and Darcys. Since Mr. Darcy felt the oversight was necessary, she did not question her brother's choice of destination most days, but it was worrisome that Miss Jane Bennet was within easy reach of her dimwitted, rich brother. At least Charles understood his duty to their family and would never make such a mistake as to marry the old maid, dowerless sister of a ruined trollop. Just in case, she would have to review the guest lists for the upcoming dinner party at Hurst townhouse after Covent Garden's Shakespeare theater opening night. There were bound to be a few titled connections of the Hursts in attendance, but if she could secure an invitation for Lady Fiona or even Lady Grace Hervey, sister to the Earl of Bristol, Charles might let his eye wonder from the would be angel.

If only she knew when the Darcys were coming back to town. She would send a personal invitation to both the theater and the dinner to Darcy House, but it would do no good if the family wasn't at home.

She supposed that for the sake of civility the invitation should include Eliza. At least the chit had manners enough not to be an embarrassment, but as soon as she was formally engaged to Mr. Darcy, Eliza would go. Miss Darcy would not have need of a social companion with her brother's fiancé around to chaperone. Perhaps she could convince him to marry by special license within a few weeks. Then she could take her place as Mistress of his home before the end of the season. She would even be able to welcome everyone to Pemberley for the summer house party as Hostess instead of being relegated to the guest wing yet again.

The only question is how best to ensure her marriage takes place. It would be much too forward and a horrible breach of propriety to just speak openly to Mr. Darcy about what is holding him back. Caroline has suspected that it is a mixture of caring for Miss Darcy and believing that she would be there once he was ready. If indeed that is the case she would have to work on both situations. She'll have to orchestrate meetings between eligible young men for Miss Darcy in order to help her along on her introduction and perhaps spend some time flirting with those men herself. If Mr. Darcy no longer fears for his sister but instead fears losing Caroline, he may just make his move.

And if jealousy does not induce action, she will just have to orchestrate a different kind of situation. Mr. Darcy has always come to Bingley house for dinner at least once a week during the season in the past, there is no reason to lessen those invitations. Also, now that Miss Darcy is out, perhaps there will be dinners at Darcy House that include both genders. Either house's library would be a fine location for a liaison. As long as a well-timed maid comes to find them. Honor will induce Mr. Darcy to church, of that Caroline is sure.

Rosings Park, Kent

1 April 1813

Miss Anne de Bourgh sat quietly in the music room of her grand estate home reading the newest gothic novel from Mrs. Radcliff. Her mother would never approve, but as she did not monitor the purchases Anne

made from the bookseller in town, she was never aware of her daughter's preference for the romantic. Since Cousin Richard had left in September, there had been little in the way of excitement at Rosings. The Bennet family situation had lost its interest after learning of the marriage ceremony. Deficient though it was, at least there had been an attempt. That both father and son-in-law had died over such a silly dispute was unfortunate but not real gossip anymore. Plus, Darcy had made a substantial investment with the Bennet's Cheapside Uncle and Lady Catherine would not want any of the Darcy holdings to suffer from such tragic connections. Even the hiring of Miss Elizabeth has blown over as an act of charity to the family. So Anne had been left in relative peace all winter.

Suddenly, but not so unexpectedly, there was a loud crash from the direction of Lady Catherine's study. Once a sennight or so, the grand lady would become enraged at something or the other and throw one of the porcelain Chinese vases at the wall. Now that Lady Catherine's eyesight was beginning to fade and she couldn't tell the difference, the steward had taken to purchasing cheap fakes to place in the mistress's study for just this exercise. Anne sighed then put her book on the side table preparing for a rant on whatever had her mother furious with the pottery today.

She did not have to wait long.

Lady Catherine stormed into the music room screeching for their trunks to be packed and a carriage prepared. Once she stopped in front of Anne, her daughter could see the large vein in the side of her mother's temple which would bulge during a particularly energetic session of ceramic hurling. In fact, usually when she got this overexcited she would actually manage to break something of value during the rampage. Since everything in Rosings actually belonged to Anne and not her mother, Lady Catherine's nasty habit of destroying the de Bourgh Family China collection was a serious annoyance to the young mistress. One day the daughter would be able to stand up to her fierce mother, but that day was most likely to be the day she laid her mother to rest in the de Bourgh mausoleum. Once she finally calmed, Lady Catherine informed Anne that she had just received a letter from Darcy. Neither he nor Georgiana were coming for Easter in two weeks, but staying in London in order to obtain Georgiana's new wardrobe. Apparently an appointment with Mme. Devy was much too important to reschedule in order to fulfil his familial obligations.

To top it off, Darcy had finally responded to Lady Catherine's insistence that he run the engagement announcement she had drafted

in the London newspapers before the start of the season. He had informed his aunt, in no uncertain terms, that he would not be running such an announcement and that she was not to run it either. In fact, he was never going to become engaged to his cousin, so the overly wordy announcement that detailed the particularity of their cradle made arrangement could be discarded. He went on to say that he was going to marry a lady of his own choosing instead of being subjected to unrealistic expectations from his family.

Finally, Darcy called out his aunt's many years of half-truths and outright lies. Though he was only 12 at the time of her death, he never remembers his mother, Lady Anne, ever saying the marriage was her particular wish. She may have believed that if Darcy and young Anne's temperaments and inclinations were in the direction to make their a union a happy one, she would have welcomed Anne as her daughter-in-law, but Lady Anne would never have wanted her children to have anything less than a fulfilling marriage. In addition to his mother's ambivalence to such a union, his father had been outright hostile to the idea. Darcy now informed his aunt that before his death, George Darcy had told him that he was not actually bound to his cousin, either by contract or honor, and to make a happy marriage instead of a marriage of money.

Anne de Bourgh was elated to hear once and for all that she would not be required to marry her dour cousin Darcy. But her elation was short lived. Lady Catherine had other ideas.

"How DARE HE! Make a fool out of my Anne while he gallivants around with that little low-born harlot!" Lady Catherine bellowed to no one in particular, even though she was not two feet from her daughter. Anne tried to suppress a smile at this. It seems her mother was not as blind to the romantic leanings of her cousin as everyone thought. Anne had been certain Darcy had affection for Miss Elizabeth last year when they were both visiting Kent at the same time. She was actually hopeful that he would ask for her hand during one of their morning walks through the Rosings grounds, which would have put an end to her mother's ridiculous schemes. But alas, there was no such offer and now her family was tainted with the elopement of the youngest sister. Her haughty, disdainful, self-righteous cousin would never degrade himself with such a wife. This is not to say that Anne had no familial affection for her cousin, he is an upstanding member of society to be sure. And Ann had always felt a certain amount of both pity and respect for such a young man taking on all of the responsibility of Pemberley and Georgiana. She was just not keen on the idea of being his wife and having to live up to the expectations he

would likely place upon the woman who takes that role.

While Anne was musing on the Bennets and how quickly an entire family could be ruined beyond the reach of true affection, her mother continued to rail at the tapestries. A final declaration from the elderly lady brought Anne back to the room. "I shall now know how to act! You and I are going to London for the season. I wonder how quickly I can terminate the lease on our Townhouse? They are just tradesmen, rich off of the barbaric east china trade route. Do you know that the son of my current tenant has actually BEEN to China?!? Now, going to India with the East India Trading Company and staying within the British society of Bombay is one thing, but traveling to China with such savages, that is just barbaric! I would have canceled their contract right then and there but they have always payed on time and it can be hard to find such diligent tenants. Oh never mind, we shall just stay with my brother for the season.

"And I will carry my point with the Earl. He will surely be behind the match and make sure that Darcy sees reason. A few well-placed words with my good friends will have your engagement all over Town with or without an announcement. We shall also make sure you are seen at all of the premier society events looking positively regal to let him know what he would be giving up were he to jilt you.

"Once Darcy sees that he must either marry you or make his family look ridiculous he will likely purchase a special license. We shall have a fantastic wedding to cap the season at St Margaret's Church with a reception at Matlock House in St. James. It will be just as your father and I were wed. I shall have to order your gown right away if it is to be ready before June. What was the name of that modiste Georgiana was going to? Mme. Devro or something? Your Aunt Matlock will know. Do not worry about the arrangements dear, I shall talk to the staff at Matlock house and the bishop of St Margaret's once we arrive in London. All will be ready."

With that declaration, Lady Catherine swept out of the room with as much force as she had swept into it, leaving a bewildered Anne in her wake. Perhaps now would be a good time to retire to her room with a headache. That should delay their departure to London by at least a fortnight. Her mother was actually solicitous of Anne's fragile health, if not of any of Anne's actual desires.

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## *Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London*

**1 April 1813**

Jane Bennet was feeling guilty. It was a silly thing for which to feel guilty, and she was sure Lizzie would tease her to no end if her sister knew, but it could not be helped. Last September, when Lizzie had come to tell them that she was taking a position with the Darcys, Jane and Aunt Madeline had protested but to no avail. Lizzie would not be moved. She had said that it was best for everyone and that Jane must stay in London so she may find a good husband. Now it seems her sister might have known that Mr. Bingley would be coming to call.

The first time he had come was the very day Lizzie and Mr. Darcy had made their agreement. While Uncle Edward and Mr. Darcy were signing Lizzie's employment contract, Mr. Bingley came in for a call at teatime. Since she was still in deep mourning, Jane was inclined to remove from company, but her aunt said it would be alright since Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley were not make a strictly social call but had been invited as close friends of the family. Jane was quite shocked when he came in and sat right beside her then began asking after her family. She was sure he knew about Lydia's disgrace and was merely being polite for Mr. Darcy's sake. When he stayed for dinner, Jane was extremely confused. She thought that Lizzie might have a better understanding as to why he had come, but since she left to take her place with the Darcys that very evening, there was no time to ask privately.

The next day she had encountered Mr. Bingley once again when Miss Georgiana Darcy had invited herself and the Gardiners to tea in order to say a final goodbye to Lizzie before they left for Derbyshire. He had supposedly come to speak with Mr. Darcy about some business matter, but both men stayed with the guests for tea. When the invitation was extended to dinner, both men again stayed in company for the entire hour before the meal was served instead of removing to speak of their business.

Curiouser still was the total lack of interaction between Miss Darcy and Mr. Bingley. If Caroline's letter was to be believed, the two were practically engaged last winter, only waiting for her official debut. But there they were in relatively intimate company and shared nary two

words beyond polite greetings.

Jane spent nearly 3 days trying to decide what it all meant before the man once again appeared at the Gardiner's home and asked to speak with her Uncle. Whatever was said, Jane does not know and cannot bring herself to ask, but after their lengthy interview, Mr. Bingley joined herself, Aunt Madeline, and the newly arrived Mary Bennet for a lively visit that lasted approximately an hour.

Another 3 days brought another visit from Mr. Bingley. He followed the same schedule of speaking to Uncle Edward then joining the ladies for tea. After nearly 2 weeks of this pattern of visits, he asked Jane if she would step out with him for a stroll through the nearby church gardens. It was one of those vividly bright fall days with enough warmth from the shining sun to make the whole of England forget that the winter was nearly upon them. He led her to a bench on the south side of the abbey overlooking the peaceful courtyard where two apple trees grew in the middle of London as if they were Christ's own miracles.

While they sat a respectable distance apart enjoying the fall weather, Jane could not help from asking after his purpose.

*"Mr. Bingley, please do not think I am insensitive to the compliment of your visiting my family, but I find that I must ask to what end you have decided to increase your connection now after so long a separation and after my youngest sister finds herself in such a questionable situation?"*

*"Well, the answer to your question depends on who is asking. If my sister were to ask, the answer would be to ensure the viability of both Mr. Darcy's and my substantial investment with your uncle's business. If it were any society gossip, the answer would be to show that I support your family's respectability. But since you are the one asking, I shall be truthful.*

*"My single desire is to spend time with you, dear Jane.*

*"I understand that it will not be possible to make any overt declarations until after your period of mourning, but I will not be moved on this. We have much to discuss about this past year and my actions over the winter, but please know that I will not be leaving you again unless you wish my departure. I intend to purchase an estate near Pemberley that Darcy has been watching for some time. It has a beautiful manor house and enough land to support an income of £ 3,500 per annum. The owners are in sufficient debt that they can no longer be selective about whom they allow to purchase and with Darcy making the introduction I believe we can come*

*to an agreement before the end of next summer. I hope to bring you home with me as its new Mistress.*

*"I have been honest with your Uncle and he approves of my suit. Now the only thing to do is win your forgiveness and hopefully your heart over the winter."*

Jane had been unable to meet Mr. Bingley's eyes during the whole of his speech. It was too good to be true! After all these months of wishing, her dreams were finally being made real. One fat tear had escaped her eye before she found her voice.

*"I assure you, my forgiveness will be easy to obtain as my heart has already been won."*

Since that day, Jane and Charles (as she now called him when out of anyone's hearing) had shared many more walks about the quiet church yard. They talked of his sister's constant scheming that made him sick. She talked of how her mother's expectations had always felt like a burden and that since her father's passing she had been blaming her reserved nature for the Bennet family's demise. He told her of how he longed to make a quiet life in the country and forget the terrible games played by the London elite. She told him that sounded wonderful. He told her that her mother and all of her sisters, including Lydia and her child, would be welcome in his home. That he would do everything in his power to make her family whole and happy again. Even if they never married, the Bennet sisters could live with the Bingleys for all of their days. At this, she had only joyful tears.

Today though, she was feeling guilty. Lizzie had sent several letters to London which arrived today. One to Uncle Edward, one to Aunt Madeline, one for the Gardiner's children which included a new story for bedtime she had constructed, and one each for Mary and Jane. Her closest sister in both age and sentiment was so very giving. It showed in everything she did. From taking the time to write stories for their young cousins to sending her earnings to Uncle Edward in order to make sure her sisters were well cared for.

This particular letter had outlined the Darcy's plans for traveling to London and Miss Darcy's debut. Lizzie wrote of appointments to visit Mme. Devy's bond street shop and all of the planned activities surrounding her lady's official court presentation. She gave certain days when she would be able to come visit and a list of invitations that were being extended by Miss Darcy for Jane and Mary to come to Darcy House. There was even a night that Mr. Darcy was allowing

Lizzie to use his theater box for her relations. The Gardiners, their oldest daughter who was now 14, Jane, and Mary were to join Lizzie for a showing of *Romeo & Juliet* the first week of June. The box could hold a total of 9 persons but it was unclear from Lizzie's letter if the other three available seats would be occupied. Perhaps they would see Mr. Bingley there and could invite him to join them.

And there lies the basis of all Jane's guilt. Lizzie had surrendered her status in order to preserve Jane's. While Jane was entertaining the suit of a wealthy man whom she genuinely loved, Lizzie had taken a position as a paid companion so that the Gardiners would be able to afford taking in Jane and Mary long enough for the scorn of society to fall away, long enough to make them marriageable. Now she was creating respectable opportunities for Jane and Mary to be seen in society, again increasing their chances of meeting men of quality.

Even though Lizzie would be dancing with eligible men at every major society event this coming Season, the chances of her meeting someone who would consider marrying a gentil servant were nearly none. The men at the events Lizzie would be attending were looking for a wife with at least £20,000 dowry and preferably a title. If she were to ever have a chance at marriage, she would need to meet men with fewer expectations and more heart. Perhaps she could convince Aunt Madeline to host some dinner parties on the evenings that Lizzie was free from her duties and invite men worthy of their compassionate Lizzie. Maybe even Charles would have some friends who would consider her sister.

Yes, that is just the thing. She will talk to Charles and Aunt Madeline. Together they will be able to provide introductions to eligible men of quality who would be lucky to marry her sister.

# Chapter 12: Sewing the Threads of Support

## Chapter Summary

The Darcys make it to London and see old friends.

*Darcy House, Mayfair, London*

*19 April 1813*

On the morning of their second full day in London, Elizabeth and Georgie dressed for their 10am appointment with Mme. Devy. Both sisters were nervous for the first social outing where they would have to pretend Elizabeth was merely Georgie's social companion. At least it was acceptable for the women to publically call each other by their Christian names so there would be no inadvertent slips but there would still be introductions and inquiries. Each was hoping that neither would make an irreversible mistake so early in the season. Darcy joined the ladies for a later breakfast than was his wont to give the small family one last bit of communion before the whirlwind of the next 9 weeks commenced.

"William, when did you say Mr. Bingley would be coming by today? Georgie and I shall be at Mme. Devy's until at least luncheon, but perhaps we should take our meal in one of the tea rooms instead of coming home if he is to be by at that time." Elizabeth would have loved to see Mr. Bingley but was actually worried about having Miss Bingley in the house for too long. She was inevitably going to have to suffer the lady's company throughout the season so she wanted to avoid contact when possible. If Miss Bingley called with her brother, like they all knew she would try to do, but found the ladies of the house out shopping, she wouldn't be able to stay for more than a quarter hour. More than likely she would not have even that time because the butler knew to request she leave her card since Bingley was coming to discuss business and Darcy was not home to callers.

"Charles is scheduled to come about 11am, but he will likely arrive earlier. Miss Bingley would never come calling before the fashionable hour and he is expected to discuss business instead of making a social call. We will spend our time in the study then remove to White's for luncheon and further men's socializing. I shall be home for tea and promise to issue no invitations. You ladies are safe from Miss Bingley if you return for your meal, but do take your time and enjoy one of the fine tea houses if you wish. Do not forget to have Georgie carry

the money and make any payments for you both. The dressmaker's bill should come to the house, as well as any other clothes shops at which you choose to stop. Georgie, promise me you shall take your sister to look for some dancing slippers. I know you believe your old ones are adequate Elizabeth, but you should at least get ones that match the ball gowns you choose." Darcy spoke with a smile hardly concealed behind his coffee cup and actually snorted into his drink when he lifted his eyes to his wife's scowling face.

Georgiana was also laughing without any attempt to hide her mirth. Since their wedding and the many gifts Darcy had obtained for his wife at Christmas, Elizabeth had been loudly protesting the number of gowns and accoutrement both her husband and sister felt necessary for this season. "Do not worry brother! I shall drag poor Lizzie to all of the accessory shops and see to it that she acquires new dancing slippers, a set of summer riding boots, and at least two sets of day gloves. She shall be properly burdened with boxes before we make it to tea."

"Fine! I shall cease my arguments about your spending money on totally unnecessary items for me **if** you will allow me to bring home at least one book of my sole choosing and promise to read it with me, sans complaint!" That sparkle in Elizabeth's eyes was the greatest joy of Darcy's life. For likely the thousandth time since their marriage, he sent a silent thanks to heaven for his incredible wife.

"My dear, I consent. Even if you bring home the most atrocious gothic novel full of sappy romance tripe, I shall read every word aloud to you and even modulate my voice with the characters if you come home with all the purchases Georgie deems necessary."

Husband and wife shook on the agreement and Georgie let out a bark of laughter at their officiousness. Shortly after they had all drained the last of their morning refreshment, Marianne and Lilian entered with their ladies' outerwear and to report the carriage was ready out the front entrance. Darcy gave his wife one last chaste kiss on the forehead then told her how much he loved her. No matter what anyone said about Elizabeth's family or believed regarding her relationship with Darcy, they were married and they truly loved each other. No one could take that away.

A short quarter of an hour later, Elizabeth and Georgiana were walking through the door to Mme. Devy's shop, already full with ladies of the *ton* desperately trying get an appointment with the famed modiste by milling about in hopes that one of her scheduled customers

would fail to show at the appointed time. Immediately upon presenting themselves to the front attendant the sisters were accosted by Georgiana's associates. Most of them were women who had been introduced to the young miss in Lady Matlock's parlor and actually wanted an audience with her brother. Each in turn came up to the pair, greeted Georgiana as if they were the best of friends, and totally ignored Elizabeth. Unnoticed by either sister, Caroline Bingley was watching from a corner of the shop with a wicked look on her face. She was beyond gleeful that Eliza Bennet was being snubbed by London's elite. That look would fade with just one word from the back of the shop.

"Lizzie!!" Mme. Devy had emerged from her last appointment and, knowing that Elizabeth and Georgiana were scheduled for the next hour, moved straight to greet the newcomers near the door. Upon seeing her favorite young Bennet, Mme. Devy pushed through the parting crowd and embraced the previously invisible woman. Every eye was now positively trained on Georgiana's companion, wondering how on earth a lowly paid companion could be on such intimate terms with the most exclusive French modiste in London.

"My dear, let me look at you! You are just as beautiful as the last time I saw you. Now introduce me to your delightful friend. Miss Darcy, I understand you are debuting this season, Yes? Well, do not worry, I shall have you both looking like princesses before your coming out ball, just you wait."

Caroline could take no more. "Miss Darcy, Miss Eliza, how wonderful to see you both again. I had no idea you had returned from Pemberley. Mr. Darcy hardly ever comes to London before the first week of May. I shall have to call as soon as possible and you must come to dinner at our townhouse as soon as Mr. Darcy's schedule will allow. I know he is very busy with business in the next few days before the season officially starts, but it is refreshing to take dinner with good friends before the hectic social agenda begins, don't you agree? I shall have the invitation to your house before the day is done." The sweetness in Caroline's voice would make even the baker's wife sick. Anticipating that the dressmaker knew Elizabeth's tradesman uncle, she asked her next question with a wide smile. "Now Eliza, you must tell us how you know Mme. Devy so well."

Mme. Devy hated the Caroline Bingley's of the world. Superiority and snobbery from the daughters of royal Dukes she could stomach. They had made her family very well situated over the years and what was the point of a title except to over inflate the ego. But tolerating

women whose money was as 'tainted' as her own coming into her establishment for no purpose but to look down upon others was not worth the profit she made from their purchases. She also knew Caroline's ploy was to get Elizabeth to admit that the Devys were friends and business partners with the Gardiners, thus exposing the Bennet family connections in trade. But Mme. Devy was prepared for such an attack.

"Why Miss Bingley, I thought you knew that Miss Elizabeth Bennet is the daughter of a well-respected gentleman from Hertfordshire, good rest his soul. But then again, since your family is from trade, I understand that you don't keep track of such things as the important landed gentry outside the London scene. tsK tsK.

"But no matter. I have known Lizzie and her sisters their entire life. My father was a long standing gentleman's tailor here in London and also the official tailor to Oxford University. He made all the school robes and also attired many of the gentlemen who attended school there. Mr. Bennet was an Oxford-man and began coming to my father when he was at university. I don't know if you even know this Lizzie, but your father met your mother through a shared connection with my father. Mrs. Bennet's father was also a client of my father's and one day, while Mr. Bennet was being fitted for his last term senior robes, your mother came by to retrieve an order. My father made the introduction and the two spoke a few words while I retrieved her purchases. In addition to the suits, I had just finished Fanny's ball gown for her debut. Even though I hadn't established my own shop yet, a select few of the wives and daughters of my father's clients had allowed me to make them dresses. Your mother's was my first ever ball gown. She looked absolutely magnifié. Before your mother was out of sight of the window, Mr. Bennet turned to my father and asked how he could secure an invitation to her ball. I believe they were courting before the end of the night and engaged during Oxford's first term break. The rest is history and five beautiful sisters. Since then, I have made at least one gown a year for each of the young Bennet ladies, and often more."

The whole store was silent as Mme. Devy detailed her connection to the previously unknown woman. You can be sure that the entirety of London will have heard the story by tomorrow over coffee. Caroline Bingley was seething inside from the snub from the modiste, but she couldn't let her anger show. She still hadn't been able to get an appointment with the woman despite being in Town all damned winter and it would be unacceptable to wear a ball gown from any other establishment at Georgiana's debut in a short 19 days. "How



lovely, I'm sure Miss Eliza has always cherished such finery as can only be obtained in London. I know that the Meryton dressmaker leaves something to be desired." Caroline looked at the dress Elizabeth was wearing for the first time and noted the superior cut and fine quality of the dress. Where in the world had she gotten such an ensemble?!

"While I never wanted for acceptable clothing in my old home, I must say that Mme. Devy's creations have always been my best pieces. In fact one dress she made for me just before I left for Pemberley last September is undoubtedly without equal." Elizabeth looked upon the older lady with gratitude in her eyes and hoped she understood.

"It was nothing my dear! I knew you would love it and it is my pleasure in life to make clothes for those who are grateful and look splendid wearing them. Now come, come! We must begin. Miss Darcy, Lizzie, I hope you will not mind but I have already started your collections. For Lizzie, of course, I could make a dress that fit like a second skin without even consulting her measurements, but I took the liberty of having the Matlock modiste send your measurements, Miss Darcy dear. I have chosen a few fabrics that are of the finest quality and made them into my most fashionable patterns. We can always adjust the sleeves and necklines if you do not like what I have chosen and I've left the trims for you to decide, but seeing you both here today, I'm sure you will love the silks I have already started. This way, you can each have a ball gown, two evening gowns, and five day dresses before the official season even starts. Anna, Marie! Bring the gowns for Lizzie and Miss Darcy and we shall start the fittings. Oh! And Hannah dear, bring out the matching gloves, slippers, and shawls."

The stunned silence continued as two young assistants brought out 8 dresses each, mostly finished, for Elizabeth and Georgiana. When the assistant named Hannah returned with armfuls of accessories in matching fabrics, the tittering began again. Many of the women in the shop were curious about Elizabeth, who obviously came from a good family even if they had never heard of her. It was also generally noted that Miss Darcy was not being given dresses of noticeably higher quality than her companion. From the perspective at the modiste's shop, the two were equals.

Caroline had slunk back into the corner of the shop while the flurry of activity to get the two ladies set up in the fitting area ensued. Once Elizabeth and Georgiana were standing hostage in front of the assistants with pins in their dresses, Caroline decided to once again

bring up the topic of Elizabeth's inferior family. "Miss Eliza, how is your *youngest* sister, has she been safely delivered?"

Technically, speaking of such an indisposition in public was not the best of manners, but since this was a woman's establishment such topics were not outright banned. And the reaction from the watching crowd was just as Caroline had wanted. With the mention of a younger sister with a babe, the titters stopped again to hear whatever details would be divulged. Amazingly, the shy Georgiana was the one to come to Elizabeth's defense this time.

"Oh yes, Miss Bingley. Mrs. Wickham has been safely delivered and her son is the sweetest babe I've ever beheld! He is so pudgy about the cheeks and has crystal clear blue eyes. I know both Lizzie and Mrs. Wickham were glad to see each other before we had to leave for London."

"Miss Darcy, you have been to visit the young widowed mother?!" This was definitely NOT what Caroline was expecting.

"Of course, Miss Bingley. Didn't you know that Mrs. Wickham is living with my great-aunt, the Lady Gwyneth Fitzwilliam in her house in Scarborough? My great-aunt had been looking for a new companion to come live with her since both of her sons are now grown and out of the house and Mrs. Wickham was delighted to take the position after both her husband and father passed. Lady Gwyneth was even more excited to have the young widow once her condition was confirmed and just adores having a babe in the house again. We all visited in late March since Fitzwilliam had been wanting to visit her Ladyship anyway. Even my Fitzwilliam cousins, Colonel Fitzwilliam and the Viscount joined us for a few days. It was actually fortuitous since Lady Gwyneth's eldest son was having a dispute with one of his tenants and the combined presence of 4 Fitzwilliam men, one with a title and another an officer in his Majesty's Army, settled the dispute quite quickly."

Mme. Devy joined the conversation once more to put any negative gossip to rest. "Yes my dear. I was so heartbroken to hear about little Lydi's husband and then to lose her father in less than a sennight! How terrible. But that is what sometimes happens when one is married to an army officer. They do not all last through the wars. At least she has her son to remember his father and provide love on lonely nights."

Elizabeth was extremely grateful to both her sister and her longtime

friend for deflecting Miss Bingley so effectively and with so much of the truth. Only the insinuations were slightly left of completely accurate. “I do believe that Lydia took our father’s death the hardest since it came so swiftly after the loss of Mr. Wickham, but she is content with her situation in Scarborough and has enjoyed living with the Fitzwilliams. She named her son Thomas Anthony Bennet Wickham after both our father and her husband. It was indeed a joy to celebrate the new life after so many losses this past year.”

Caroline decided that no good could be achieved in the dressmaker’s shop especially since the renowned Frenchwoman was so obviously biased in favor of the little chit and her disgraceful family. She would just have to have an exclusive tea party at Louisa’s townhouse, hopefully with her brother-in-laws most prestigious relative, Almack’s longest standing patronesses, Lady Sefton, in attendance. Then she would be able to give the real gossip behind the Bennets, sticking with the ridiculous elopement story of course, but telling everyone that the “army officer” and Mr. Bennet both really died in a duel. For now she would bow out, but not before she reminded everyone of Miss Elizabeth’s position.

“Well, I’m glad to hear that both your sister and nephew are healthy and well settled in the north. It is a shame she will miss the season as I know how much Mrs. Wickham loves to dance, but you will no doubt be able to give her many delightful details of your time chaperoning Miss Darcy. It was very kind of Mr. Darcy to give you the opportunity to join his household after your father’s estate was entailed to your cousin. I’m sure you will enjoy the entertainments for as long as Miss Darcy has need of your services.”

With a kind smile and more truth in her words than Caroline could ever fathom, Elizabeth replied; “Yes, Mr. Darcy is very kind and I have never been happier than this winter as a valued member of the Darcy family household. I’m sure that Georgie and I will have a wonderful season and enjoy each other’s friendship for many years to come.”

# Chapter 13: The Best of Intentions

## Chapter Summary

The Gardiners host a dinner party and the Darcys get more than they bargained for.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

***Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London***

***25 April 1813***

Tonight was the night that Jane Bennet was going to finally put her plan to secure Lizzie a good husband into practice. As she arranged a center piece for the dining room table with the early flowers from her aunt's small garden, Jane chuckled to herself that she was beginning to sound a bit like their mother. For over a month, Jane and Aunt Madeline had been carefully considering all the men of their acquaintance for those suitable for an introduction to Lizzie. Once she had mustered the courage to ask Charles, he too had supplied a list of men he thought would welcome meeting the lovely and intelligent Miss Elizabeth. So there were three men of trade and two recently ascended gentlemen coming to dinner tonight as well as several of their mothers and sisters.

The only slightly unwelcome guests for the night were Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy. Not that anyone in the Gardiner house was at all unhappy to see the Darcys, but Jane hoped that Lizzie would not spend the entire night attending to Miss Darcy instead of speaking with the eligible men brought in to specifically seek her attention. Their inclusion in the party was somewhat of a surprise since the invitation had been insisted upon by Uncle Edward.

Aunt Madeline had been nearly at the end of her patience when trying to explain why it was not a good idea to bring Lizzie's employers along for the party. Never in all their years of marriage had Uncle Edward ever looked at the guest list for a dinner party, let alone insist on particular invitations. But he would not be moved. The Darcys were investors in his business, they were good friends to Mr. Bingley, and they were Lizzie's employer. He insisted that to fail to issue them

an invitation would be atrocious manners.

Jane had penned the invitation and given it to Miss Darcy when she had called at the Gardiners with Lizzie a few days ago. Both Aunt Madeline and Jane had been sure that the Darcys would decline, given the late notice of the invitation and that none of their station would be in attendance. So, when Miss Darcy accepted immediately upon receiving the invitation, both ladies were shocked. Even more so when Mr. Darcy sent over a confirming reply with his warm regards for anticipation of the evening.

*Well, Jane mused, there is nothing to be done now except try to steer the conversation towards Lizzie and the Gentlemen becoming more acquainted. Perhaps Charles can speak to Mr. Darcy if the evening begins to get out of hand.*

The evening started out well enough. Lizzie and the Darcys arrived early and both young women insisted in helping with the final preparations for the party. Miss Darcy was especially skilled in floral arrangements and had the mantle above the main parlor fireplace looking splendid in no time despite the dearth of choice in blooms this early in the season. Aunt Madeline and Mary went to the kitchen to ensure everything was ready while Lizzie accompanied Jane into the dining room to finish placing the china upon the table and light the candles about the room. Mr. Darcy and Uncle Edward retired to the study to share a glass of wine and talk business before the other guests arrived.

Jane took the opportunity to speak privately with her sister. “Lizzie, I’m so glad that you have been able to come this evening. I believe that it will be a wonderful opportunity to make new friends.”

“Of course I shall always have time for my family Jane;” Elizabeth replied without looking up from her flame. “The Darcys may have a busy social schedule, but all are agreed that making time for ones close friends is much better than sitting through a dinner party given by mere acquaintances who only want to be seen with the wealthiest guests gracing their table.”

“I am glad to hear it. We were actually surprised that the Darcys decided to accompany you tonight. Surely they will not find equals amongst tonight’s guests.”

Elizabeth looked up at this remark. “Whatever do you mean Jane? Mr. Bingley will be here and he is Mr. Darcy’s closest friend. Also, I

believe Wil ... eh... Mr. Darcy said he is friendly with Mr. Bingley's friend, Mr. Tannerbaugh." Elizabeth turned back to her task quickly in order to cover her faux pas. "They were all at Cambridge together, were they not?"

Jane looked at the back of her sister's head with a furrowed brow. Did she really just hear her sister nearly call Mr. Darcy by his Christian name? And a shortened version of it at that? Perhaps it was nothing, she was on such intimate terms with Miss Darcy, and they certainly seemed to be as close as two women could be. Maybe Lizzie was just used to hearing Miss Darcy address him informally or maybe Mr. Darcy was less formal in his home than Jane would have imagined. But perhaps there was something else going on between her sister and her handsome employer. Jane decided not to press that issue tonight with a house full of guests set to arrive any moment, but she stored it away to discuss with Aunt Madeline and Charles.

Bringing the conversation back to the topic at hand, Jane continued on with her plan. "Yes of course Mr. Darcy is friendly with several of the guests tonight, but I do hope that you will be able to relinquish your post as companion for the night and take the time to make an impression upon the young men in attendance."

Now it was Elizabeth's turn to furrow her brow. She looked upon her sister with a confused countenance. "Why ever would I need to make an impression upon the guests? Are they not just Uncle's business associates and potential new investors brought by Mr. Bingley?"

"No Lizzie, while perhaps they are also those things, each young man has been invited tonight with the specific purpose of meeting you."

"But what interest can they have in me?" Elizabeth was beginning to suspect her sister's purpose and was not at all happy with this turn of events. "You don't mean to bring me suitors do you Jane!? When did you turn into mamma? Please tell me that Uncle's guests have not been so bluntly spoken to as to expect my attentions tonight!?"

Elizabeth was beginning to panic just a little bit. William would not be happy with this expectation for the evening and the last thing she needed was for her protective and slightly jealous husband to betray their affection in mixed company.

Jane could see the worry on her sister's face, but could not fathom from where it came. Lizzie had always been the one of them that was able to laugh in the face of their mother's schemes and continue on as if nothing was amiss. Panic was not an emotion Jane was used to

seeing in Lizzie's expressive eyes. "Calm yourself Lizzie. Of course no such suggestion has been made to the gentlemen. That would be highly inappropriate. But each has been chosen specifically for his suitability for you." Jane decided a little equivocating was in order to ease Lizzie's mind. "And Mary of course."

"And what of their suitability for you dear Jane?" This question was to go unanswered as the front door knocker was clearly heard before Jane could find her voice.

Back in the parlor, the whole party began to assemble. Instead of allow Jane to steer her towards the gentlemen who had just arrived with Mr. Bingley, Elizabeth made her way directly to her Uncle Edward and William. They were sitting in a conveniently secluded section of the room.

"Uncle, I have yet to greet you properly. It is good to see you again. Have you been having an enjoyable talk with my husband?" Elizabeth kept her voice very low since the possibility of being overheard was great, but speaking the truth with one of the few people who knew their situation eased her worry considerably. Uncle Edward was her guardian and he would protect her even when William could not.

"Yes my dear, William and I have been having a nice chat. Did you and Jane have any time to catch up before the guests arrived?" Edward had been trying to gently dissuade Jane and Madeline from their matchmaking schemes but it was hard to do without giving away too much.

"Yes Uncle, we had a most enlightening talk just now." Before Elizabeth could continue, Jane, Mr. Bingley, and Mr. Andrew Tannerbaugh came to greet their host and be introduced.

"Darcy, old man, how amazing to find you here! It has been an age since we last met. I'm sure it's been 3 years if it's been a day. How are you?" Mr. Tannerbaugh came straight up to shake Mr. Darcy's hand and get a better look at the beautiful sister of Miss Jane Bennet. Charles had spoken in the carriage of his courtship of the eldest Miss Bennet, but also mentioned that two of her younger sisters would be in attendance tonight. Miss Jane Bennet was certainly beautiful in a classic and serene sort of way. But Andrew Tannerbaugh enjoyed a livelier disposition, as his good friend knew, and was very interested in the description Charles had given of a young women of wit and humor.

“Tannerbaugh, I was not about to miss this evening once Charles mentioned your inclusion in the invitations.” Darcy smiled genuinely at his old friend from university. Tannerbaugh was a man close to Charles’s disposition and had always been able to lift Darcy’s mood. If he had been able to hear the thoughts running through the young man’s head, he likely would not have made the introductions so readily. “I am well, very well indeed. Let me introduce you to our host for the evening and a good friend of mine, Mr. Edward Gardiner. Edward, this is Andrew Tannerbaugh. He, Charles, and I were at Cambridge together.”

After the men bowed and shook hands, Darcy turned to Elizabeth. “Also allow me to introduce one of Edward’s nieces, Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Miss Elizabeth is also a good friend to my family and currently a member of my household as companion to my sister.” Darcy delivered the introduction, which had been carefully crafted and practiced over the last several weeks, for the first time. It was still a bit awkward but at least no one suspected it was a lie.

This was the opening Tannerbaugh had been waiting for. “Miss Elizabeth, it is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He bowed low over Elizabeth’s hand and ghosted a kiss over her knuckles.

Elizabeth withdrew her hand as soon as it was possible. “Thank you Mr. Tannerbaugh. I understand that you are a longtime acquaintance of Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley. I would not want to burden your reminiscing. I believe that I shall provide some entertainment while we wait for dinner to be announced.”

With that, Elizabeth curtsied and quickly retreated to the pianoforte. She played softly while the remainder of the guests filtered into the parlor. She had effectively ensured that there would be no more introductions before the dinner call. Jane was mildly annoyed at her sister’s uncharacteristic retreat, but she reasoned that Lizzie was just uncomfortable with the idea of being introduced to eligible young men with expectations. Perhaps she would become more accustomed to the idea during dinner. Jane had very carefully chosen the seating so that Lizzie was placed between Mr. Tannerbaugh and one of Uncle Edward’s business associates, Mr. Carter. A third young man, Mr. Slaughter, who was a respectable London barrister, was seated directly across from her sister. Lizzie would have the opportunity to converse with as many of the eligible men in attendance as possible.

So it was quite a surprise when Jane looked down the table and saw Lizzie sitting directly between Mr. Darcy and Uncle Edward! She was



sure that she had placed Miss Darcy in that seat, thinking that the ever protective Mr. Darcy would not want his baby sister, newly out in society, to be sitting near young men not of his intimate acquaintance. But clear as day, Lizzie was sitting in a seat so far removed from any of the eligible guests that she would not be able to even hear their conversations let alone participate in them. In Lizzie's intended seat resided Mary and in the seat originally designated for Mary sat Miss Darcy, across from her brother and next to the sister of Mr. Carter.

Elizabeth chanced a look down the table and met her sister's annoyed glare. She knew that Jane had put in a lot of effort to this party, but Elizabeth was in no mood to entertain suitors. After Jane revealed her intentions for the evening, Elizabeth had switched the place cards for herself, Mary and Georgie. It was an added bonus that secret husband and wife were able to sit next to each other during the lengthy meal. Such an occurrence would never happen if they were known to be married as couples were not allowed to sit next to each other during formal society dinners. Catching a glimpse of Jane's countenance for himself, Edward chuckled at both of his nieces for their respective scheming.

At least not all of Jane's effort would be wasted. Mary would get the chance intended for Elizabeth. Their younger sister had changed dramatically in the last few months. No longer subjected to their mother's constant references to Mary's plainness, the most conservative Bennet sister had found her own beauty. It also helped that Aunt Madeline was gently teaching Mary about dressing her hair in conservative but appealing fashions. Their Aunt had also taken Mary shopping to replace the gowns she had given to Lydia and found several styles that suited Mary but were more flattering than those she had sewn herself. All in all, the "plain" Bennet sister was not looking so plain in the glittering candlelight.

Dinner progressed slowly but with great conversation all around the table. Mary found a fellow music lover in the kind Mr. Slaughter; Georgiana and Miss Elaine Carter spoke of the activities surrounding their formal debuts, both of which would be taking place in early May; while Elizabeth, William, and Edward had a lovely talk about all kinds of topics. The only conversation which was stilted was between Madeline, Jane, and Charles at the opposite end of the table from Edward, Elizabeth, and William.

All three kept an eagle eye on the proceedings, especially on the interaction between Elizabeth and William. None would say that they had crossed any lines of propriety, but their friendly banter and

frequent mild laughter was a sign that employer and employee were comfortable in each other's presence. Jane was beginning to worry about the implications of Lizzie's earlier slip in the dining room while Charles was musing that he had never seen Darcy so at ease during a dinner party with persons unknown. Madeline began to worry about another scandal for the Bennet sisters. At least Edward was continuously involved with their conversation and could observe them from a close vantage point. Madeline resolved to ask her husband about his impression of their relationship that evening after all the guests were gone.

When the last of the plates were cleared away, Madeline invited the ladies to the parlor for tea while Edward invited the men to stay for brandy and cigars. With the Ladies departed, most of the men gathered closer to Edward's end of the table and spoke at length of the imports business. Darcy especially was fascinated with the tradesmen in attendance who had actually been to China or India during their early years working for their fathers or the East India Trading Co. It was a long time after the last of the cigar butts was extinguished before Charles could introduce the idea of rejoining the ladies.

As the men filed out of the dining room, Charles held Darcy back. "Darcy, you must not monopolize the male conversation in the parlor. Jane and Mrs. Gardiner have put a lot of thought into this night and you are getting in the way of the introductions."

Darcy was taken aback. He thought the night had gone on swimmingly so far and was contemplating a few new investments with the tradesmen to which he had been introduced. "What introductions are you talking about? I have already been introduced to each of the men here tonight and can't see how my conversation with them has hindered the evening."

"Surly you know why these *eligible* men have been invited to dinner?" A blank stare was all that greeted Charles. "They are here to meet Miss Lizzie and Miss Mary, not talk business with a potential investor. Your sister won't need a companion forever and then what do you expect Miss Lizzie to do?"

"You can't be serious?! What does Edward have to say about all this?" The panic and anger inside Darcy was battling for dominance. His first impulse was to storm into the parlor, grab his wife, and leave immediately.

"Jane confided that her uncle is not at all concerned with Miss Lizzie's

prospects. In fact she feels he is oddly opposed to making introductions for her.” Darcy let out some of the tension in his shoulders at this, of course Edward would not be supporting schemes to marry off his wife to someone else. “But nevertheless, both Jane and Miss Lizzie are now over 21 and can make their own choices about whom to marry. I have assured Jane that any or all of her sisters are most welcome to live with us forever, but wouldn’t you rather Miss Lizzie be happy with a home of her own?”

“I can assure you Charles, I spend a great deal of time considering Elizabeth’s happiness and marital felicity every day.” Without even noticing his mistake in speaking about his supposed employee in such a familiar tone, Darcy rushed out of the room to ensure his wife was not uncomfortable with the attentions of the Gardiners’ dinner guests.

But Charles noticed.

## Chapter End Notes

Just Because: I have a good friend whose not too distant ancestor was a Judge from London named Slaughter.

# Chapter 14: Questions and Answers

## Chapter Summary

It is becoming harder for the Darcys to keep their secret from the people who know them best.

## Chapter Notes

Sorry for skipping last week. I've been very busy recently. But as a consolation prize, here's an extra long chapter.

*Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London*

**30 April 1813**

Edward Gardiner sat in his study with a terrible headache. Mr. Andrew Tannerbaugh had been to call on his wife and nieces nearly every day since his introduction to the Bennet sisters at Jane's dinner party. The young man's goal was to catch a day where Lizzie was visiting with the family. This morning was likely to be the day for that unpleasant occurrence.

Lizzie had sent word early to Madeline and Jane that she was free for the morning since Miss Darcy would be visiting with her good friend Lady Miranda. Lizzie would see Miss Darcy to the Stanley Townhouse then come to the Gardiner residence for a nice long visit. Little did she know that Mr. Tannerbaugh was likely to intrude on her precious family time.

As soon as the door had closed on their last dinner guest, Madeline and Jane both turned on Edward demanding to know what was going on with Lizzie and Mr. Darcy. Edward was not prepared for the force of their attack and stuttered for a few moments before he was able to discern their main concern. Apparently, Lizzie's lack of cooperation in meeting any of the eligible men and the obvious familiarity between the secret lovers did not go unnoticed by the concerned aunt and sister. It was all Edward could do to dissemble about their relationship and insist that he had seen no evidence of an improper relationship between the two.

In reality, seeing the evening through the eyes of his wife and niece, it

was easy to guess at the true affection Lizzie and William felt for each other and without the knowledge of their marriage, that open affection would ruin Lizzie.

Edward had sent a warning letter to the Darcys early the next morning detailing both the schemes and concerns swirling around the Gardiner residence. A reply had been sent with their thanks and a plan by Lizzie to only come on mornings that were not Aunt Maddie's calling day to minimize the possibility that she would meet any would-be suitors. Unfortunately, nothing could be done to stop the continuation of Madeline and Jane's plan and Mr. Tannerbaugh seemed increasingly focused on having his chance with Lizzie. The only thing left was to pray that the situation did not devolve into another Mr. Collins debacle.

At the sound of the heavy front door knocker, Edward rose from his desk and proceeded into the parlor. If he could not stop the uncomfortable situation, he would at least be present to mitigate the damage.

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### ***Darcy House, Mayfair, London***

The Darcy's London house staff was in a state near panic. They had not witnessed such a scene as what took place this morning since the day, nearly two years ago, that had brought news of an alarming nature from the cook Miss Darcy had taken with her to Ramsgate. On her extended holiday, the young miss had only taken her personal companion, Mrs. Younge; a few stablemen to man the carriage; and a cook since the rented seaside house had all the other necessary staff already in residence. The stablemen were dedicated Darcy servants, but not being house staff, they were unaware of the visitors Miss Darcy entertained. Mrs. Younge turned out to be very bad indeed, so it was a blessing that the young cook, Katlyn Harper, another cousin to the Grayson's through their mother's family, had enough sense to write her uncle about the comings and goings of one Mr. Wickham. Katlyn had never met Mr. Wickham or even heard stories about the rake, but she did not like the way he was being familiar with the young miss, nor how her supposed companion and chaperone allowed

such extended visitation with the man. Having long ago relieved themselves of that particular worry and spending the last 6 months receiving letters from Pemberley detailing, then seeing for themselves, the marked joy in all three Darcys since their Master's wedding, many had forgotten how incredibly fierce Mr. Darcy could be when provoked.

And Miss Caroline Bingley had certainly provoked Mr. Darcy.

It came in an innocent enough package, just a small folded invitation delivered shortly after 10am by one of the Hurst footman to a dinner party that night at the Hurst Townhouse in Kensington. It was even addressed in Mrs. Louisa Hurst's hand instead of Miss Bingley's. But the inside revealed the overly ornate script Miss Bingley used to impress the gentry. More in the style of a letter than an actual invitation, Miss Bingley ruminated on how wonderful it would be to have one last, quiet *family* dinner before Miss Georgiana's presentation in the morning. If it had stopped there, perhaps Mr. Darcy would have just rolled his eyes at her stressing of the word "family" since the Darcy's were not family to either the Bingleys or the Hursts, but the next revelation made his blood boil.

Elizabeth was not invited.

Not only was she not listed on the front of the invitation, either by name or by position as would be expected for a social companion, she was, in fact, specifically called out in the body of the note as unexpected. Even though Miss Bingley used some flowery language about giving "Miss Eliza" a night off to dine with her "Cheapside relations" before her duties consumed her waking hours, the message was clear. No lowly servants allowed. The Hursts were only expecting 2 Darcy's to dinner.

Additionally, Lady Sefton was expected along with Mr. Hurst's brother and sister-in-law. It would be very rude to bring an unexpected guest. Mr. Darcy did not want to insult the most influential patroness of Almack's the very week he was expecting for his sister's application for membership to be reviewed. His first reaction had been to decline outright, but Charles knew he didn't have dinner plans for the night which means that Miss Bingley likely knew, and if he refused an invitation from such close friends when he had no other obligation, he again risked insulting the Bingleys and the Hursts, including Lady Sefton, by association. No, he would have to go to dinner at the Hursts without his wife and probably endure the not-so-thin barbs to Elizabeth's person from their *de facto* hostess. Perhaps he could

orchestrate an early departure given that they had to be formally dressed at in the palace presentation hall early the next morning.

But just because he would be forced to play nice that evening didn't mean that his fury with Miss Bingley couldn't be expressed to Charles.

Darcy still hadn't quite forgiven his friend for the intervention at the Gardiner's dinner party last week. The two men had even had words the next day at White's about letting Elizabeth come to her own decisions in life and not pressing her to become engaged when she really didn't want any suitors at present. Even if he could understand Miss Bennet and Charles's intentions, he still didn't like having other men look at his wife with an appraising eye. Elizabeth had taken the whole event with her usual aplomb, though admitted later that evening in their bed that she had been very uncomfortable all evening, knowing about the schemes being advanced by her own family. The mothers and sisters of the eligible men present had not been subtle during the ladies social time, asking Elizabeth and Mary many personal questions. Thankfully no one started interrogating Georgie, though one mother looked at the obviously rich heiress with interest. The only saving grace was knowing that Edward would never let anything get out of hand in his home.

Now the Bingleys were once again getting in the middle of the Darcys' affairs and William was not going to take it without at least expressing himself! Intellectually he knew that Charles had nothing to do with the invitation to dinner tonight or Miss Bingley's direct snub to the woman only a select few knew to be William's wife, but he had allowed his sister to chase after the young Master of Pemberley for long enough.

It was now nearly 11am. Elizabeth and Georgie had left for their respective day plans just before the post had arrived, which left Darcy to deal with the insulting invitation. Wanting to leave before the calling hour, he hastily scribbled an acceptance then burst out of his study barking orders at the staff. One footman nearly tripped trying to get the note from the Master's hand and take it to Kensington, another dashed off to get Mr. Darcy's top hat and coat, the stableman was called to have Mr. Darcy's horse saddled, and Mrs. Simpson was directed to inform his sister and wife of the evening's plans as soon as they arrived home. With a flurry, Incitatus was taking the first strides away from the Darcy's stable just as the grandfather clock in the vestibule began to chime the hour and Miss Bingley rapped on the front door knocker.

Connor was standing on the landing of the stairs leading to the family wing when Mr. Simpson opened the front door. He watched Miss Bingley's sickly sweet expression turn sour and then the Lady actually stamped her foot when told that none of the family were home, including the Master. She practically yelled at the butler that she was sure Mr. Darcy was in his study as she had been told that the ladies were visiting Miss Darcy's friends today while the Master was catching up on work before tomorrow's festivities. Miss Bingley demanded that the butler tell Mr. Darcy who was at the door because surely he would be at home to his good friends even if he was declining visitors in general.

Several servants abandoned their pretense of doing their duties and blatantly stared at the confrontation in the doorway when Miss Bingley began shouting at the stony faced butler. "What do you mean he's left for White's!?!? How can he have decided to change his plans and actually leave in under an hour? I don't believe you, let me in this minute!"

"Madam, I assure you that the master has left and is not at this moment in this house. I cannot speak to his change of plans as Mr. Darcy comes and goes as he pleases. It is my job as his butler to accommodate every whim he chooses to entertain in an efficient manner. Now, it is not the practice of the Darcy's to allow guests during their absence. If you please leave your card, I will gladly let the family know of your visit when they arrive home." Mr. Simpson stood like a statue in the doorway, giving the annoying woman no room to look into the house or push past him into the foyer.

"You had better start thinking about your situation and asking for introductions to gentry in need of a butler for when I am Mistress of this house, you will not spend one more day in its residence!" Miss Bingley was now sporting a very unattractive shade of red over her face that clashed with the color of her hair. Connor had to bite his knuckles to keep from laughing out loud at the Lady.

Mr. Simpson was in no way intimidated by this harpy. Secure in the knowledge that Mrs. Elizabeth Darcy would, God willing, be Mistress of Darcy house for a long time after the elderly Mr. Simpson departed this life, he simply replied; "Should you ever become Mistress of this house, I will gladly walk out its front door and follow the Darcys to wherever they have chosen to relocate for you cannot seriously believe my Master would ever marry you. Good day madam." And with that, Mr. Simpson closed the heavy door hard, turned the heavy lock so that it would be audible from the outside, and strode off



towards the servant's quarters for a much needed class of brandy.

Connor decided it was time to take a trip to Belgravia. Despite the general rule that what happened inside the Darcy's residence stayed there, he was certain his brother and Mr. Bingley needed to know about this confrontation. Besides, even though Mr. Simpson had told Miss Bingley that Mr. Darcy was at White's, in truth he was on his way to the Bingley townhouse to speak to Mr. Bingley. It would not do for Miss Bingley to go home and find her brother and Mr. Darcy having words. If he took a fast horse and kept to the alleys, avoiding the crowded fashionable streets of Hyde Park, he could arrive before Mr. Darcy and convince Mr. Bingley head to White's. Then they would both be out of reach of the red-headed shrew before her carriage could make it back to Wilton Row.

Dashing out of the back door, Connor found his father, Darcy House's Stable Master, already had a horse saddled and waiting for him.

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### *Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London*

Mr. Tannerbaugh was the first to arrive promptly as the great clock in the foyer struck 11:00am. He knew from Mrs. Gardiner's note that Miss Elizabeth, or Miss Lizzie as her family called her, would be dropping Miss Darcy off at her friend's house at about 11:00am, so she was not expected for another half hour at least. Upon confirming that only Mrs. Gardiner, Miss Jane Bennet, and Miss Mary were seated in the parlor, Mr. Tannerbaugh decided to take the opportunity to speak with Mr. Gardiner privately. Even though Elizabeth was of age, it was a good idea to speak to her uncle before coming to an understanding in his home.

"Mr. Gardiner, thank you again for allowing me to grace your home. I was hoping to speak to you for a moment before joining the ladies."

Edward was surprised at the young man's request, but saw this as an opportunity to perhaps head off the coming confrontation before it began. "Mr. Tannerbaugh, I would be happy to entertain you in my study. Please, come this way."

Tannerbaugh mistook Edward's inviting demeanor as confirmation of

his acceptance as a suitor for Miss Lizzie and started off before the door to the study was even fully closed. "Mr. Gardiner, you can have no mistake as to my purpose today. I know your wife and niece have encouraged my intentions and the only thing left is to come to a formal understanding. As a man of 26 I have waited for a while to find a woman worthy of my affections. While I have not known Miss Lizzie for long, I am convinced that we would make a wonderful match. She is beautiful and poised with a lively spirit. Her status as a gentlewoman would ease my introduction into society and our sons would be the grandsons of a gentleman, so able to hold that title themselves. I have a generous inheritance coming to me when my father passes and intend to purchase an estate in Kent as soon as an agreement can be made with the seller. In fact, marriage to a gentlewoman may expedite those negotiations. So sir, I ask for your blessing to speak with Miss Lizzie privately today with the intention of proposing marriage."

Edward took a moment to gather his thoughts while he poured two glasses of scotch from the decanter. Once he had handed Tannerbaugh his glass, he decided that only the truth without the particulars would be effective. "Mr. Tannerbaugh I have many things to say about your purpose here today and none of them are what you likely wish to hear.

"First, I would refrain from addressing my niece so informally. She would take offense to someone outside her intimate circle calling her any variation of Lizzie, and she most defiantly hates to be called Eliza, so do not try that either.

"Second, while I am aware of my wife and Jane's desires for Miss Elizabeth, I do not share them. My niece is perfectly happy with her situation and I happen to know that she is not looking to alter her position at this time.

"Finally, my niece is a very passionate young woman and has often said that only the deepest of love could induce her to matrimony. You speak of a marriage of convenience, mostly your convenience, which offers her only wealth and an upscale London neighborhood address. While most women of her station would jump at such an offer, I will inform you that Miss Elizabeth will not. Since you have only been introduced to the lady once at a crowded dinner party and likely cannot even name her favorite author, I do not believe that Miss Elizabeth will be receptive to your suit. I cannot give you my blessing to ask for her hand and I would advise you not to make such an offer."

Tannerbaugh was at a loss. This was not at all how he imagined this interview to proceed. “I understand your concern about your niece’s feelings, perhaps I should change my offer to one of formal courtship so that we may become better acquainted before we become engaged. You are right that the last week has not afforded me the opportunity to be in company with Miss Elizabeth that I would have wished. I must admit that I am a bit surprised that you would not welcome at a suitor for one of your orphaned nieces. Their care must be costing you a great deal with the loss of revenue from their father’s estate.”

“I assure you young man, I am more than able to care for all of my family. The expense is not a burden on me at all.” Edward was not impressed by this line of discussion.

“Then why would you allow Miss Elizabeth to take a position with the Darcys and risk losing her status as a gentlewoman?” Tannerbaugh was getting frustrated now.

Edward was not in the mood to have his decisions questioned by a young social climber who didn’t have enough heart to even care about Lizzie’s desires. “My niece was determined to find a position and was 2 weeks from her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday when Mr. Darcy and I signed her employment contract. If I had not agreed, she would have just left on her birthday and taken the first position offered to her.” Edward decided that this interview was over. “Now, I believe that we have exhausted this topic. I suggest that we join the ladies.”

But Tannerbaugh was not going to let Edward have the last word. “As you have rightly pointed out, Miss Elizabeth is of age. She no longer needs anyone’s permission to marry and can entertain any suitor she wishes. If she was so determined to take a position, then she might be more inclined than you believe to be securely married and mistress of her own home. I regret that you are so dismissive of your niece’s welfare but I shall not be deterred. My purpose stands. We shall see what Miss *Lizzie* thinks of my offer.”

With that, Tannerbaugh turned to leave the study without as much as a by-your-leave to Edward. *Oh Lord*, Edward thought, *help us all survive Lizzie’s reaction to this.*

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White's Gentleman's Club, St. James Street, London

Darcy strode into the front parlor of White's with a determined look on his face. He'd been turned away at the Bingley residence by the butler saying Charles had just left for White's to meet another Gentleman acquaintance for a few hands at the gaming tables. Before turning back to his horse, Darcy was confused to catch what he thought was a glimpse of Connor in the back hall talking to his older brother. Hadn't Connor been at home when Darcy had left just over 30 minutes ago? Surly there was no way his valet could have beaten him here. The streets of London had been an absolute mess given the hour and the fact that much of the *ton* had finally arrived to their Town residences with the official start of the season tomorrow. Darcy had been forced to speak to several acquaintances strolling along Rotten Way before finally making his way to the south entrance of the park.

Oh well. It didn't really matter what his valet was doing since his services weren't needed for several hours. Turning from the house, Darcy had strode quickly off towards St. James. Street. Charles was indeed in the front parlor where non-member visitors were admitted to wait for their party to arrive. He had actually given Darcy's name as the member upon whom he was waiting since he was truly not meeting anyone else and the staff was accustomed to seeing him in Darcy's presence. But he at least feigned surprise at Darcy's arrival, mere seconds after he had taken a seat in one of the great winged back chairs.

"Darcy, what a pleasant surprise. Care to join Bristol and I for cards and luncheon?" Charles reasoned that it didn't matter whose name he threw out since Darcy was likely to demand a private audience in one of the smoking rooms.

"No Charles, I'm afraid I do not plan to entertain the tables today and I must insist that you disappoint our good friend as well since I have some important business to discuss with you."

"All right man, don't get worked up. I'm sure I won't be much missed as there was going to be a group playing and if anyone asks after me the staff will surely tell them that we've gone upstairs to discuss business in private." Charles nodded at the footman in the room who gave a curt bow in acceptance of the message that would never be delivered.

As soon as the waiter set two tumblers of scotch down on the table between the two men, Darcy rounded on his long-time friend and began to vent his frustrations. "Charles, what is the meaning of your sister excluding Elizabeth from the dinner party tonight? It is completely ridiculous and extremely rude! Georgiana will be most uncomfortable all night knowing that her best friends and companion is not at her side besides being embarrassed at the snub directed at a lovely young woman who has every right to be recognized by our friends and family. It is not to be born!"

Charles had only met Darcy's Aunt Lady Catherine de Bourgh once, but the experience had been memorable, and he was suddenly struck with the family resemblance. He also thought that now was not the time to bring up his friend's familiar use of Miss Elizabeth's Christian name. "Darcy, do you not think that a night off to see her family might be nice for Miss Elizabeth? She can't live her life at your beck and call all the time."

"She is not at my beck and call! She is a valued member of my household and treated with respect. If she wants to visit her family, she is always welcome to take the carriage and Georgiana enjoys visiting with the Gardiners as well. We would never demand so much from Elizabeth that she should feel the need for a night off." Darcy was so infuriated from the events of the last week that he was beginning to forget himself, calling Elizabeth by her name and letting his passion shine through.

Charles was ever observant of his friend's moods and had always been suspicious of Darcy's admiration of Miss Elizabeth. Perhaps it was time someone blatantly asked him about his intentions. "Darcy, do you love Miss Elizabeth? Will you ever marry her given that much of the *ton* will assume she was your mistress before becoming her wife?"

Darcy stopped short and all the fight drained out of him at Charles's words. Trying for a nonchalance he did not feel, Darcy said; "Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Come off it man, you have been in love with Miss Elizabeth since we all danced at Netherfield. If you had done something about that a year ago perhaps the Bennets would not be in such a poor position now. Or if I had not listened to you and Caroline at the time, I would have been in a position to help their family after Mr. Bennet's death. You cannot tell me today after referring to Miss Elizabeth by her Christian name only and spending all evening mooning over her at the Gardiners if full company that you do not love her. The question I

have for you is what are you going to do about it?"

Darcy sat staring at his best friend, second to only his cousin Richard who knew him better than any other man. It was easy to forget that Charles was such a bright and observant person because he played the flippant fop so well. *Now what should I say?* Darcy wanted nothing more than to run to Elizabeth's side so that she could tell him what to say. This was a decision they really should make together, but he didn't have that luxury and Charles was waiting. Since it was unlikely that he was going to completely fool Charles, he decided something of the truth was the best option.

"Yes Charles, I love her. I've never wanted to deny it, but think what Lord Matlock would say if I married the sister of a woman ruined by George Wickham. Not to mention that I KNOW what Lady Catherine would say. She still holds the delusion that I will marry Anne. Until Georgiana is well settled, I cannot risk the Darcy name. After my sister is happy with a good man, then I shall turn to my own happiness."

"And will Miss Elizabeth wait until such time as Miss Darcy is settled? How many years must she wait while her reputation becomes more tenuous? Today she is the daughter of a deceased gentleman. She can use her upbringing to attract a man of at least modest wealth who wants an introduction into the gentry. In a few years she will be nothing but a gently bred servant, unsuitable for marriage by any man in the *ton*. If you will not, or cannot, marry her what will she do?" Charles's words were pointed but his tone was soft as he could see that this was a topic of pain for his friend.

Darcy looked up from his glass, directly into Charles's eyes and spoke with passion that spoke of his dedication. "I will marry her. Elizabeth Darcy will be my wife and I will be truly happy for the first time since my mother died. Until the day I can make this known to the world, I shall provide her a home and the respectability that comes from the protection of the Darcy name. I will never look at another woman or offer for another despite the pressure to marry and produce an heir. Georgiana and I treat her as a member of our family and already show her the respect due as my wife. I understand how this may look to the members of our social sphere, but I cannot find the desire to apologize."

"Have you spoken of this to Miss Elizabeth?"

"Yes, and her uncle Edward, but we have kept out intentions from the rest of her family in order to protect her other sisters. It would

probably be a larger threat to their reputation if the *ton* found out that my intended was living under my roof than if it was known that I had married a ruined woman's sister during her mourning. Additionally, Elizabeth fears her mother's demands if our understanding were to become known. I have been supplying Edward with money, supposedly Elizabeth's 'salary,' for the purpose of establishing a new home for Mrs. Bennet and some dowry for Miss Mary and Miss Kitty."

Charles was beginning to see the struggle Darcy and Miss Elizabeth had been hiding for nearly a year, but he was also becoming angry that Jane had suffered needlessly. "What excuse can you provide for keeping all this from Jane, especially after learning of her fears for her favorite sister?"

"Elizabeth did not want to ask her gentle and good sister to keep such information from their mother. Perhaps you are right and given the new revelation of Jane's fears for Elizabeth's future we should reconsider that decision."

"Okay then."

Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London

Elizabeth was looking forward to the day with her family. William had several business meeting today and would barely be home in time for supper and Georgie was visiting Vauxhall Gardens with Lady Miranda and the Lady's companion. As two chaperones for only two young ladies was unnecessary, Elizabeth had decided to spend the whole day with the Gardiners, Jane, and Mary. Pulling up the Gardiners' residence, Elizabeth was feeling particularly happy. This would be a whole day without having to deal with scheming Ladies trying to win her husband's money or mildly insulting questions about her family.

She was planning on finally integrating (in a nice way) Jane about her relationship with Mr. Bingley and perhaps taking her young cousins to the park after luncheon to feed the ducks. What greeted her instead after pulling off her pelisse and bonnet was an overly familiar Mr. Tannerbaugh and a scowling Uncle Edward.

“Miss *Lizzie*, how wonderful to see you. It has been far too long since we have been in company.” Tannerbaugh managed to secure Elizabeth’s hand before she could respond and bowed low. His lips made decidedly more than a brushing touch to the back of her knuckles.

Finding her voice, Elizabeth responded with a mildly scolding tone. “Mr. Tannerbaugh, it has been barely a week since my Uncle’s dinner party where we were initially introduced. I would say that is not long at all for persons of such little acquaintance.” Finally being able to break from the would-be suitor’s grasp, Elizabeth moved to Edward for safety. “Uncle, I’m so glad to see you. I have been looking forward to seeing my family for an extended visit. I was unaware that you had business associates to entertain today.” Elizabeth emphasized *business* in an attempt to separate Mr. Tannerbaugh from the expected social scene waiting in the parlor.

“Oh no, Miss *Lizzie*, I am not here to discuss business with your uncle, I’ve been invited by your aunt to spend the morning in the company of good friends.” Tannerbaugh tried to again separate Elizabeth from her recalcitrant uncle by taking her hand to lead her into the parlor but Elizabeth was not about to be handled by this man she barely knew.

“I’m delighted to hear you have become so acquainted with my aunt in merely 5 days. Perhaps you should enjoy your friends without my interference. I shall speak to my uncle for a few moments.” Elizabeth and Edwards were about to head back to the study when Madeline Gardiner finally came into the hall to stop her niece and husband from ruining Mr. Tannerbaugh’s plans.

“Now *Lizzie*, what nonsense is this? Mr. Tannerbaugh would not see your inclusion in our party as interference at all, I’m sure. In fact we were all saying just the other day how much your lively presence would brighten the entire affair.”

“Why Aunt *Maddie*, how nice of you to include me. I see I must ask you for news of my mother as it is obvious you have been exchanging letters with the lady. Tell me of the news in *Meryton*.” Elizabeth’s normally soft eyes were hard and cold as she sent the barb in her Aunt’s direction. Both Jane and Mary cringed at *Lizzie*’s obvious distaste for the scheming but could not disagree that their aunt’s words sounded much like what each sister imagined their mother would say in the same situation. Perhaps it was as Mrs. Bennet had always said, worrying about how to find good husbands for five

daughters could change a person.

Elizabeth made a bee-line for the empty seat on the settee by Jane that their aunt had vacated in order to force the persons in the hall to come sit in the parlor. She was safely placed between her sisters and took each of their hands so as to ask how they were fairing. Uncle Edward, Aunt Madeline, and Mr. Tannerbaugh entered shortly after Elizabeth and each was at a loss as to where to sit. All of the other seating in the room was designed to be slightly separated from the settee and slipper chair where Jane, Aunt Madeline, and Mary had previously been sitting in an attempt to provide Elizabeth and Mr. Tannerbaugh some private conversation. Elizabeth had immediately noticed the re-arranged floor plan and was becoming more and more uncomfortable with the situation. Perhaps she should just outright ask that her carriage be brought back around and invite her family to visit at Darcy House when they were free from other social obligations. Jane and Aunt Madeline glanced at each other and inwardly sighed. This was not starting out well.

After a moment of awkward standing about and overly enthusiastic questions from Elizabeth, the maid brought in a lovely tea service. Jane hopped up to serve their guests and invited Mr. Tannerbaugh to take a seat. Never one to miss an opportunity, Tannerbaugh was seated close to Elizabeth on the settee before the cushion began to cool. Elizabeth's alarmed expression caused Edward to ignore his wife's invitation to sit with her on a sofa a bit removed from the other grouping. Instead, he actually drug a chair across the floor to a position near his nieces and his guest. Madeline had to stop herself from stomping her foot in aggravation.

Mary was extremely confused as to what was going on but could tell her sister Elizabeth was alarmed, her aunt was frustrated, her sister Jane was annoyed and concerned, and her uncle was resigned somehow. Aunt Maddie had been so sure this morning that Elizabeth would be welcoming to Mr. Tannerbaugh's presence and perhaps there would even be an understanding between the two. Mary reasoned that if there was ever going to be any kind of understanding, the fewer people witness to it, the better. She excused herself to go check on the Gardiner children in their nursery.

Aunt Madeline also excused herself to check on the kitchen arrangements for dinner that evening. Jane decided to stay since Elizabeth looked near a panic, but placed herself on a seat closer to her uncle instead of taking the chair vacated by Mary. Mr. Tannerbaugh decided that now was his opportunity to speak to

Elizabeth.

“Lizzie, I ...”

Elizabeth cut him off immediately. “*Mr. Tannerbaugh*, I am sure you are a welcome friend to my Aunt and Uncle, but I have never given you leave to address me so informally. Please remember that I am a gentlewoman and will not tolerate being disrespected in such a way.”

Letting some of the irritation of the morning seep into his façade, Tannerbaugh replied in anger. And as it is well known, angry people are not always wise. “Miss Elizabeth, I believe you will find that you are no longer a gentlewoman, but simply a gently bred servant. I have been trying to change that situation but I will not tolerate such insolence from you when you are my wife.”

“And when exactly do you believe that I shall be your wife sir? So far you have been barely introduced to me at a crowded dinner party, taken extreme liberties both with my person and my name on the second day we have ever been in company together, and just now insulted me most grievously. I should like to never see your face again after this moment and I can assure you that I shall never agree to be your wife!”

Elizabeth was shouting now, properly shouting. It was as if both the egotistical assurance from Mr. Collins’s proposal and the insulting barbs from Darcy’s first proposal were combined into one ultra-insulting moment. At least this ridiculous man hadn’t taken forever to state his purpose.

Jane and Uncle Edward just stared open mouthed at the couple sitting on the settee. It was unimaginable that Mr. Tannerbaugh would say such a thing to Elizabeth. Perhaps he had been given too many assurances of her acceptance. Jane was beginning to doubt whether she and Aunt Madeline were correct to try and force Elizabeth to meet eligible men when the man in question suddenly reached out and struck Elizabeth across the cheek.

The next moment seemed like an eternity. Tears began to form in Elizabeth’s eyes as she held her palm to her face, but the ice and fire in her stare never faltered. Edward pulled the younger man to his feet roughly by the back of his cravat causing Tannerbaugh to choke slightly. Madeline had entered the room after hearing Elizabeth’s raised voice just as Tannerbaugh’s hand made contact with Elizabeth’s face. She wheeled on her heels and opened the front door so that her

husband could throw the ruffian down the front steps without so much as one word.

Once her family was back in the parlor, Elizabeth announced that she was going to go lay down for a few minutes even though what she really wanted to do was get back in the carriage and go home to the comfort and security of her husband's arms. "Aunt, if you will have a cold compress sent to me, I require a few minutes of rest before continuing with our visit. Perhaps when I return we can put all of this ridiculous scheming to rest. Uncle, I will trust you to handle this in any way you see fit."

Elizabeth ascended the stairs without even a cursory glance back to her family.

Jane was nearly drowning in her own tears. "To think, we nearly forced a horrible man that we barely know onto Lizzie! He struck her during their first conversation, just think what she might have endured had she actually been inclined to marry him!" Jane was shaking now and terrified now of what marriage to a man on unknown character could mean.

"Calm yourself Jane, Elizabeth was never in danger marrying that man. She does not desire a suitor and perhaps it is time that you both begin to trust me on this matter. I know what is best for Elizabeth and it is not a man like Mr. Tannerbaugh." Edward gently chided his wife and niece for their machinations in regards to Elizabeth.

Madeline and Jane both agreed that they would give up on their plans for Elizabeth given how poorly this encounter had gone and the lady's continued resistance to anything resembling a suitor. While husband and wife retreated to the study to calm their nerves, Jane retrieved the cold compress from the housekeeper and went in search of her favorite sister.

Elizabeth was laying on the bed shared by Jane and Mary, silently weeping into Jane's pillowcase. The elder sister came to sit on the bedside and laid the cold compress gently on her younger sister's face. "Lizzie I am so sorry for what has happened here today. I know that you have been unhappy about out attempts to find you a suitor and we should never have encouraged Mr. Tannerbaugh against your wishes."

"No Jane you should not have. You know I have never wanted a husband simply for the sake of security so why would you encourage

one so much as to be expecting my acceptance?" Elizabeth felt betrayed by her sister and aunt. Betrayed that they would not listen to her many pleas to be left alone and betrayed that they had encouraged a man so far as to believe she would accept him without any true inducement to affection.

"I am worried about your future happiness and feeling guilty about your choice to take a position in order to save me from such a fate. I am the oldest, I should have been the one to become a governess and lose my position in society for the sake of my sisters. Instead I entertain a courtship with Charles while you have lost everything to save us all."

Elizabeth had to smile at the inadvertent admission by her sister. "I have been hoping to hear confirmation of your understanding with Mr. Bingley. I am very glad for you! You will make a beautiful bride. If you do not think that the Pemberley garden is too far from London for the affair, I might say that the rose garden in the fall is quite picturesque."

"Lizzie! You cannot offer the use of someone else's house for such a thing as a wedding!"

"You are right Jane, and if I were merely Georgiana's social companion my offer would be highly inappropriate, but in truth I am more than a servant in the Darcy household. I have kept this from you believing it was better but I can see I have only brought you pain. You must never tell anyone else, but I am not Miss Elizabeth Bennet any longer. William and I were married in a private ceremony in the Darcy family chapel on my birthday last. Uncle Edward signed the marriage settlement before we left London. Only he, Georgiana, Lydia, and the Darcy house servants know. We have come up with the story about my taking the position as Georgiana's companion in order to protect Georgiana this season from any negative gossip. I am sorry I did not trust you with this earlier."

Jane was unsure of how to respond to this highly unexpected revelation but suddenly all of Lizzie's, Mr. Darcy's, and Uncle Edward's previously baffling behaviour made much more sense. "Are you happy Lizzie?"

"I am happier that I have ever been."

"Than that is all that matters."

Chapter 15: Interference

Chapter Summary

The Darcys' begin the official season with some new allies and some new enemies.

Matlock House, St. James, London

2 May 1813 – Georgiana's Official Debut Ball

How has my life become a living torture!?

Darcy stood broodingly on the periphery of his Aunt's ballroom, watching closely as both his wife and his sister were squired about the dance floor by dandies and rakes! Or at least that was what he was telling himself. In fact, most all of the men present were either family, close friends of the Fitzwilliam and Darcy families, or men of the best breeding with impeccable reputations. Elizabeth and he had discussed dancing partners with Georgiana before the ball and each man had asked her imposing older brother for permission before securing the guest of honor's hand. While there was no such need to gain Darcy's permission for anyone to dance with Elizabeth, so far many of the eligible men seeking an introduction had extended that curtesy. Only Richard and Charles had asked for a dance from Elizabeth without seeking Darcy's permission. But this did not keep Darcy from hating every minute that either his baby sister or his wife were in the arms of other men.

His mood was not helped by the fact that the last 2 days had been some of the worst in recent memory for all of the Darcys and Elizabeth's London family.

Gracechurch Street, Cheapside, London

30 April 1813 – Immediately Following Mr. Tannerbaugh's Expulsion

As soon as the front door thundered shut, Madeline Gardiner turned on her husband and demanded that he divulge whatever he had been keeping from her. Edward decided to tell Madeline of their niece's marriage. Elizabeth had given him permission to handle the situation and it was obvious that keeping such secrets was only causing problems for them all. Madeline would understand the need to keep this information from their sister Bennet and if Edward's instincts were correct, Elizabeth was having a similar conversation with Jane in their old chambers upstairs.

Madeline was less shocked than Edward would have thought given the news that her niece had actually been married for nearly 6 months, as opposed to living as a paid servant, to one of the most influential and wealthy men in all of England. Instead, she was calm and immediately sent one of the mews boys to find Darcy and bring him to Cheapside.

The poor boy ran nearly all the way to the Darcy's townhouse just to be told the master was at his club. When he had made the run to White's, he was told Mr. Darcy had left for his solicitor's office some 30 minutes ago. Another dash about town and the solicitor's page was telling the lad that Mr. Darcy had concluded his business quickly and already left for home. Knowing that it was important Mr. Darcy come to the Gardiners' home, the boy once again made his way to Mayfair. For the last time, he found himself arriving just after his prey had left, but at least this time the gentleman had left for Cheapside. Mr. Simpson had informed his master of the summons from the Gardiners as soon as he crossed the threshold and Mr. Darcy had turned right around calling for his driver to return. The kindly old butler took pity on the poor boy who nearly collapsed on the doorstep and sent him down to the kitchens for a kip and something to eat.

Darcy had himself nearly sick with worry by the time he completed his mad dash to the Gardiners' home, fearing whatever had happened in order for them to send a summons. He did not wait for either his driver or the butler, opening first the carriage door then the Gardiners' front door himself in an attempt to get to Elizabeth all the sooner. Edward came out of the study at the sound of the front door and encountered a very agitated Fitzwilliam Darcy. The older man coaxed the younger into his study for a glass of scotch by promising that Elizabeth was fine but currently resting above stairs with her sister.

Both men settled into chairs with glasses in hand before Edward launched into the events of the day. The moment he revealed that

Elizabeth had been struck, Darcy was out of his chair and striding toward the front door before Edward could register his movement. Thankfully, Madeline caught her newly revealed nephew before he was able to do something too rash.

“Mr. Darcy!” Madeline cried from her position in front of the door to the parlor off of the front vestibule, “Where are you going in such a rush?”

“I believe my first destination is to the sword chest in the Darcy House study to retrieve my Grandfather’s rapier, then I am going to kill Mr. Tannerbaugh without even the curtesy of first returning his strike with my glove!”

Edward and Madeline were eventually able to keep the enraged husband indoors by appealing to Elizabeth’s need to see him and reminding him that outright murder was not favorably seen in the eyes of the Crown. But there was no stopping him from marching up the stairs to the bedchamber where Elizabeth and Jane were resting.

Both sisters had fallen into a dose after their respective revelations from the stress of the day. They were laying on the bed facing each other with hands clasped and the no-longer-cold compress resting on Elizabeth’s cheek. Darcy stormed into the room, causing the door to crash against the wall which jolted both sleeping sisters to wakefulness and sent Jane tumbling to the floor.

Seeing the alarmed expression on his wife’s beautiful face finally penetrated Darcy’s half mad mind. He offered his hand to his secret sister, apologizing profusely for his inexcusable interruption to their rest. Jane collected herself quickly and smiled serenely in that way of hers which instantly put everyone at ease. She assured Darcy that she understood her brother’s need to see to his wife’s wellbeing. As Jane slipped out of the door and closed it, leaving only Elizabeth and Darcy inside, her words finally registered. Darcy made his way to the bed and took Elizabeth in his arms, feeling only relief at finally having her small frame resting against his larger one.

Very few words were spoken, but Elizabeth expressed her desire to go home where they would be free to lay in each other’s arms and forget the outside world for at least one more night. At that, Darcy groaned as he was reminded of the dinner engagement at the Hursts that night. He was seriously tempted to rescind his earlier acceptance in favor of spending the evening at home, but Elizabeth insisted he and Georgie go for all the reasons identified earlier during his rant in his study.

Chiefly, they should not risk insulting Lady Sefton. Georgie was not even officially out until tomorrow morning and had not yet been issued an invitation to Almack's. They must endure this lie for a little while longer. At least now they had a couple more allies to help them survive the experience.

Darcy insisted that, at a minimum, Jane come home with him and Elizabeth to stay for dinner and through the night. Darcy did not want his wife to be alone all evening for both her entertainment and her safety. As unlikely as it was that Tannerbaugh would risk coming to Darcy House to continue his misguided attempt at engaging Elizabeth's sentiments, the over protective husband was not going to take that chance. Jane was more than happy to spend an evening with her sister, so, with his wife and sister-in-law safely tucked into the spacious Darcy House parlor and extra footman on duty while the Master was gone, Darcy and Georgiana headed off to their dinner engagement with the Bingleys and Hursts.

Hurst House, Kensington, London

30 April 1813 – The Dinner Hour

If the day had been stressful, the night was outright rage-filled. The dinner party was small, only 10 individuals in all including Louisa and Reginald Hurst, Reginald's brother the Elder Mr. Hurst and his Mrs. Hurst, Charles Bingley, Caroline Bingley, Lady Sefton, Lady Sefton's Companion, Darcy, and Georgie. With so few persons, it was impossible for either Darcy to avoid Caroline and immediately upon their arrival, she attached herself to them. She prattled on about Georgie's presentation in the morning and the ball in 2 days, asking far too many questions than was strictly polite in mixed company. Finally, she came to the crux of her extended dissertation on the subject. Caroline offered, in the most gracious way possible, that actually sounds ridiculous and insincere, to help with the last minute details for both events.

"I'm sure that your Aunt, the Lady Matlock, has everything well in hand, but it is always nice to have *experienced* help when executing

such important events. I'm sure that she is feeling the stress of having naught but Miss Eliza to help her. I doubt Eliza has ever even seen St. James Palace, let alone been inside for presentations."

Georgiana's ire at both the supposed "Lady's" treatment of her sister and the horrible experience she had forced upon Elizabeth that day reared in full force at Caroline's degrading comments. Choosing to be very formal in her address, unlike Caroline's careless tossing out of "Miss Georgie" or simply "Georgie", the youngest Darcy shut down the rude and unwanted conversation.

"Actually *Miss Bingley*, Miss **Elizabeth** was presented at court when she was 16 by her father's aunt, the Lady Herschel whose husband had been a Naval Captain knighted for his distinguished service to the Crown. After their Great-Aunt died, the younger Bennet sisters, Miss Mary and Miss Catherine, were fortunate enough to have Lady Lucas do the honor upon each turning 16. Mrs. Wickham is the only Bennet sister not to have been presented since she was married before the event could take place. I am sure that Miss Elizabeth has adequately prepared me for the event tomorrow and managed to procure anything I may need for both the presentation and the Ball."

All during her speech, Georgiana was looking about the room with her fan lazily wafting cool air over her face to keep the angry flush from becoming too noticeable. After another pause, Georgiana turned to Miss Bingley, snapped her fan shut, and tapped the harpy on the arm. In a placating voice and with a fake smile on her face, she said; "But I do *appreciate* the offer to help retrieve the items I will require before entering society."

Caroline's eyes flashed at the information that the chit had been presented by family who had a bestowed title and at such a young age. She hadn't been presented until well after Louisa's marriage and only grudgingly by Reginald's older sister-in-law. The other women in the *ton* had snickered behind their feathered fans at her with such a tenuous introduction into society, no matter how much money she had spent on her gown for the occasion. With a titled Aunt, Eliza was likely accepted as a moderately well situated gentlewoman regardless of what she wore and promptly dismissed as a threat to any of the heiresses in the London Marriage Market. Well, as soon as Caroline procured Mr. Darcy, the chit would be out of a situation and Georgiana would have to get in line behind the new Mrs. Caroline Darcy.

Dinner was not much better since it was obvious that Caroline had

personally selected the seating arrangement. Darcy was seated directly to the right of Caroline and across from Lady Sefton at Reginald's end of the table. The entire meal was spent in conversation initiated by Caroline about some lovely part of Pemberley or inane question related to Darcy's noble family connections.

Georgie was faring little better with a continual string of questions from the elder Mrs. Hurst about the Darcy's new gentil servant. She had heard about the extraordinary service she was given at Mme. Devy's establishment and the quality of the clothing purchased. It seems an unnecessary expense to the older lady, spending such sums on even the best of companions. Georgie was embarrassed, not just for herself, but also for the young woman sitting to her other side who served as Lady Sefton's companion. The Lady's servant was dressed appropriately, but plainly, and using not nearly the quality of fabrics that Darcy had purchased for Elizabeth. No matter how many times she tried to deflect the questions, Mrs. Hurst would come right back to the topic.

Once the ladies separated from the men for refreshments, it got worse. First, Georgie had to endure repeated barbs directed at Elizabeth from Caroline and Louisa. She tried to defend her sister, but was afraid of going too far and betraying their secret. Lady Sefton keep looking strangely at the debutant during the conversation and Georgie finally lost her nerve and held tongue entirely after only a few minutes. When the men joined the party, Caroline was eager to setup tables for whilst, but the game would only allow 4 players to a group leaving 2 guests out of the games. Knowing that Darcy never played at cards she was able to steal a private moment with the man during the games.

"Mr. Darcy, I know you must be concerned for Miss Georgiana's coming out since your esteemed Aunt has only Eliza to help with the planning. Your sister is much too loyal and naive to believe that her companion is unsuited to the job of planning such an event, but surely you would welcome a more appropriate guide to ensure Georgiana's debut is a success."

Darcy merely shrugged his shoulders and continued to watch the card game without any verbal response to Caroline's barb.

But the lady would not be deterred. "I'm also worried that Eliza is a poor influence on your sweet sister. She's much too bold in company, acting as if she were one of Georgiana's friends instead of her paid servant. I know it is a change for the poor dear, being thrust into the life of a servant where she used to be a gentlewoman, but if someone

doesn't take a firm hand with the young woman, she'll be an embarrassment. Perhaps, if you wished, I could make sure to accompany Georgie and Miss Eliza for their first few events," meaning of course that Darcy would have to procure her an invitation to many of those same events since she had neither the popularity nor the standing in society to garner such invitations personally, "and instruct Miss Eliza on the proper behaviour for someone of her station. It would not do for the *ton* to see how poorly she performs her duties."

Still nothing verbal from the Gentleman, but if Caroline was more familiar with his facial expressions, she would have seen the thunder in his eyes and the rise in color to his cheeks indicating his extreme anger. Unwisely, she continued with her "helpful" advice.

"In fact, if there were to be more of a connection between the Bingleys and the Darcys, Georgie would not have need of a companion at all." Caroline went so far as to brush her palm over Darcy's arm and lean forward slightly so as to give him a better view of her décolletage.

Repulsed by both the intrusion upon his person and the demeaning things she was saying about his beloved wife, Darcy reacted physically by harshly pulling away his arm from her reach. After drawing the attention of most of the rest of the room, he went on to roughly put the lady in her place.

"Miss Bingley, I'm sure I don't know to what you are referring. Charles and I are as connected as two unrelated men can be and neither of us have immediate plans to increase our connection. As for your opinion on how Miss Elizabeth is performing her *duties* in my household, all I can say is that I am very satisfied." Darcy sported a small blush and barely contained a smile at his own inappropriate innuendo, praying only after the words left his lips that no one else took his words to mean what he truly meant. "She does not need further instruction in how to behave in her new station. Thank you for your offer to serve my family, but no thank you. In the future, if I ever have need of your opinion, I shall supply it to you."

Chapter 16: A Season of Mischief

Chapter Summary

The Ball at Matlock House

Chapter Notes

I'm posting early as an apology for being late recently. I was doing some heavy rearranging now that the story is fully developed and planning for the final Act. Thanks to everyone who has been reading and encouraging me. I have enjoyed the experience immensely.

Matlock House, St. James, London

2 May 1813 – Georgiana's Official Debut Ball

Since Georgiana's presentation yesterday, Darcy, Elizabeth, and Georgiana were officially fully submerged in the lie that has taken over their lives. And to top it all off, Lady Catherine and Anne de Bourgh had appeared yesterday as if by some dark magic! Their expected Aunt, the Lady Matlock, had arrived at Darcy house at precisely 10:00am with the largest Matlock carriage carrying herself, her daughter Lady Marianne Fitzwilliam, and the de Bourghs. A second carriage followed with Lady Catherine's maid and Mrs. Jenkinson, Anne's companion.

While there would have been plenty of room for both Georgiana and Elizabeth in the spacious carriage, Lady Catherine about had an apoplexy at the mere suggestion! She was not fit be riding with the titled Ladies to such an event. Anne's companion, a decidedly more appropriate servant than the overly dressed Miss Elizabeth, was riding in the second carriage and so should Georgiana's companion. In fact, Elizabeth should just stay home since her services were not needed with so many *family* members about to chaperone the debutant. Mrs. Jenkinson only came to see to Anne's health. Besides, Anne was a perfectly appropriate companion for Georgiana, certainly better than Miss Elizabeth.

Never mind the fact that Anne had never been presented at court while Elizabeth had. Nor that a social companion would be expected

to arrive with the young lady almost as an equal during all of her major functions. And Lady Catherine certainly ignored each of Georgiana's pleas that she should would feel better with Elizabeth at her side. The stubborn woman, who was not even originally invited to the event, would not be moved!

So Darcy had looked on in disgust as his aunts, cousins, and sister took the nicely sprung and lushly outfitted carriage, while his wife was forced to ride in the old servant's carriage sporting thread bare seat coverings which provided no support at all after so many years of use.

Thankfully the actual presentation had been successful and the entire party was back at Darcy House for a celebratory luncheon by noon. At least in his own home, Darcy could overrule his aunt's attempt at dismissing Elizabeth to the servant's quarters, stating emphatically that the Darcy's treated Miss Elizabeth as a member of the immediate household and she would be eating at the table she helped design as was appropriate for a gently bred social companion.

And now here they were, in a lavishly decorated ballroom with all of the most important Lords and Ladies of the *ton*, and all of their respective eligible offspring, crowding the dance floor. Having to endure watching his baby sister dance with men who may one day take her from him would have been torture alone, but it was painfully obvious that Lady Matlock had planned this event as much as Georgiana's Coming Out as Darcy's Matchmaking Extravaganza!

Both of Lady Matlock's eligible nieces were present, Lady Miranda Stanley and Lady Fiona Finch, along with their entire families. In addition to the Earls of Nottingham and Derby, the Earl of Bristol and his family was also amongst the numerous guests. Mr. Goodwin Hervey, the Honorable Earl of Bristol, was a young man newly into his inheritance. In fact, Goodwin was originally the second son of Bristol and had studied to become a clergyman before his father and older brother were killed in a carriage accident nearly two years ago. He had studied alongside Charles at Cambridge and had been good friends with the Darcy and Fitzwilliam boys all his life. The change from aspiring man of the cloth to Member of the House of Lords had been a massive undertaking and the bookish young man was anything but ready for the assault from the marriage minded ladies of London. Lady Matlock and the Dowager Bristol both hoped that Georgiana Darcy and the young Lord would make a good match due to their shy and quiet natures.

Lord Bristol's younger sister, Lady Grace Harvey, was also looking for

a connection to the Darcy's but couldn't care one fig about her brother and the mousey Miss Darcy. She had her sights squarely on the Master of Pemberley, or more accurately on the ready cash in the bank account of the Master of Pemberley. In her first season last year, the Lady had little luck, along with the rest of London, securing any time with the elusive bachelor. But now, with her brother expected to court the sister, she had her chance at the brother. Knowing that she was at a disadvantage in that she was not family to the Lady Matlock, Lady Grace was determined to make her intentions known early.

Darcy had thus far escaped having to dance with anyone save his sister, his cousins Marianne and Anne, and Elizabeth. After the first 4 sets he had placed himself at the center of a group of young men, all lifelong friends, who were coming and going for dance partners but always maintained a core of about 4 to 5 men.

Amongst the group were the Finch boys; Oswald Finch the Viscount Finwell, second son Army Captain Thurston Finch who was a known rake and spendthrift, and third son Solicitor Bernard Finch. While Darcy had been playmates with Finwell and the Captain since they were all barely out of their cradles, it was Bernard who had always been a true friend. A quiet, educated, and kind young man, Bernard was his mother's favorite, his father's disappointment, and often picked upon by his older brothers. He had earned top marks at Oxford then went to clerk for one of the most sought after solicitors in all of London. At not quite 26, he was poised to become a partner in the exclusive London practice and last year had purchased a lovely 5 story town house facing Russell Square Park. Darcy had dined with Bernard at his home last season after visiting the British Museum and was quite impressed with the size and comfort of the place.

In addition to the Finches, James Stanley the Viscount Asbury, was also among the men generally shirking their duty to dance with the young ladies. But at this precise moment, much to Darcy's annoyance, he was doing the opposite of shirking by dancing with Elizabeth. Asbury had been present in Matlock for only one day during the Countess's holiday festivities because a fire on his estate had delayed his departure, but one day had been enough to recognize that Miss Darcy's companion was absolutely lovely. Never one to overlook a beautiful woman, Asbury had asked her for a dance as soon as she was free. Since she had been standing near her employer at the time, he had asked his old friend for permission to squire a Lady of his household. Darcy's clenched jaw while answering silently with merely a wave of his hand was unexpected. Asbury briefly wondered if Darcy felt it was inappropriate for his servant to be dancing with a Viscount

or whether he was just being his normal tense self at social events. Either way, he let it go as he lined up on the floor with one of the loveliest young ladies at the ball.

Just before the end of the current set, the third Darcy had set out after dancing with only close female relatives or supposed servants, Lady Matlock came over to the group of eligible men with a gaggle of young women in tow. She intended to break up the stag party and personally ensure that her ridiculous nephew danced with each of the titled young women in the room before supper. Although not initially invited by the Countess to join the invading Ladies, Caroline Bingley attached herself to the group. The Bingley's had been invited only due to Charles's friendship with Darcy and the hopeful inclusion of Lady Sefton. It seemed the older lady showed up wherever Caroline went, so Lady Matlock put aside their questionable background and allowed the two social climbers inside Matlock House for Georgiana's big day.

Caroline made a bee-line for Darcy the moment the Countess interrupted the men to make completely unnecessary introductions. Putting her finger tips lightly on his arm, Caroline tried to engage Darcy in a semi private conversation away from the crowd. "Mr. Darcy, how lovely to see you tonight! Georgiana looks absolutely radiant in her ball gown and I'm sure you are so proud of her presentation yesterday."

Before he could even contemplate how to reply, Lady Matlock stepped in to separate the wholly unacceptable Bingley woman from Darcy. "Of course we are all so proud to finally have Georgie out in society." She then abruptly changed the subject. "I know it's been since before Christmas, but you remember my niece, Lady Fiona, and my cousin's daughter, Lady Miranda, don't you Fitzwilliam?"

"Yes Aunt, of course. Ladies, are you enjoying the evening?" Darcy replied stiffly and generically since he was honestly having a hard time remembering which blond lady was which. The one in the green dress had blue eyes like Lady Derby and the one in the blue dress looked more like Lady Matlock so perhaps the first was Lady Miranda and the second was Lady Fiona, but he was not sure. Richard would know, he would have to ask him to identify the ladies before addressing either one.

From somewhere to Darcy's left, another young woman abruptly made her presence known. "Brother, aren't you going to do the curtsy of introducing me to your good friend?" The lady was addressing Goodwin with a hard gleam to her eye and a fake smile plastered on

her face.

“Of course Grace, Darcy, Lady Matlock, may I present my sister, the Lady Grace Hervey. Grace this is Mrs. Josephiane Finch Fitzwilliam, the Honorable Lady Matlock, and her nephew Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire.”

Lady Grace quickly curtseyed to Lady Matlock then extended her hand for Darcy to bow over. The Gentleman performed the expected pleasantries then found himself with Lady Grace somehow attached to him, having maneuvered herself between himself and her brother to twist her arm under his elbow. Before he was done staring at her hand gripping his arm, the audacious lady began to speak again. “Mr. Darcy it is such a pleasure to finally be able to meet you properly. I know that we were introduced when you visited with my brother several summers ago at our estate, before I was out in society but now we are all able to enjoy such sophisticated company. This is truly a fabulous event for Miss Darcy, she must feel every bit a princess today. Goodwin, have you had occasion to dance with the guest of honor yet? No? Well you shouldn’t wait too long or her dance card will be completely full. And what about you Mr. Darcy, have you had your fill of dancing this evening?”

Still baffled at how the young woman was maintaining her physical attachment to him and trying to develop a plan to disentangle himself without doing her bodily harm, Darcy was completely at a loss to follow her incessant rambling. Not even waiting for a reply from her captive, Lady Grace went on. “I’m sure that you have not since you have thus far only danced 4 dances with ineligible women in your family. Do you have a specific Lady chosen for the Quadrille sir?”

“No, I have not engaged any specific lady for the Quadrille.” Replied Darcy automatically while still attempting to make space between them.

“Well wonderful, I would love to accompany you for the next set, thank you sir.” And with that, Lady Grace began to drag Darcy towards the dance floor. He was doubly confused by her actions until he heard the beginning stanzas of a Quadrille and had to stifle his moan. She had tricked him into dancing with her for one of the longest sets of the entire night.

Elizabeth watched as her husband was drug onto the floor by a young woman whom she had never met. Once she arrived at the grouping of men, and now women, where Darcy had been standing for half the

night, she observed the sour looks on many of the women's faces and the shaking head of Lord Bristol. Given the general mood of the group, Elizabeth decided not to comment on Darcy's current dance partner. Instead, she located a cup of punch and headed to the terrace for some fresh air. The dark corner of the space was the only place one could find any significant air movement, so Elizabeth moved into the shadows opposite the massive doors to the ballroom.

After only a few minutes in the cool late evening breeze, Elizabeth heard and saw her husband help a theoretically faint young woman onto the terrace. It was the same woman he had been forcibly dancing with just moments ago and her ploy was so ridiculous that it was almost comical.

Almost.

She was not about to have her husband caught up in some scandal, so Elizabeth made to go assist the young woman and free Darcy from her grasp. Interestingly, Miss Caroline Bingley beat Elizabeth to the young woman's aide.

"Lady Grace, are you alright? I saw you have a dizzy spell on the dance floor and Mr. Darcy escort you outside for fresh air. Can I be of assistance?"

"Yes"

"NO"

Darcy and Lady Grace answered at the same time in the opposite. Darcy cleared his throat and finally freed himself from the distressing woman's clutch. "Yes Miss Bingley. That is most kind of you to look after Lady Grace while she recovers from her spell. I must get back to the ball and ensure Georgiana is well. Excuse me ladies." With that he made a jerking motion with his head that might have been a strange attempt at a bow, then spun around and strode back into the ballroom.

Elizabeth was about to follow her husband when she heard the two ladies turn on each other like a bunch of wild cats.

Caroline turned on her ward the second Darcy was across the threshold. "Don't you think for one moment that I believe you had a fainting spell in there! I know exactly what you were trying to do and it won't work, he can't be trapped by the likes of you. And even if he were found in a compromising position, who would make him marry

you?! Your pathetic brother the Cleric Earl? Don't make me laugh! Bristol may be an earldom, but he has no sway over Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"As if you ever had a chance with anyone in that entire ballroom. You with your dirty trade money and a brother dressed up like a gentleman but still overseeing the running of a mill in Yorkshire! And don't tell me that marrying your sister to the younger Hurst brother gives you any standing in society. Just because Lady Sefton graces your sister's table does not make you a gentlewoman. You may have failed for nigh on 5 seasons to catch the Master of Pemberley but that doesn't mean others will similarly fail. We shall see who makes the match and whose family has the ability to force the issue if necessary." Lady Grace flipped open her fan directly in front of Caroline's face, giving the fiery red head the cut direct even if there was no one they believed could see, then strode back into the ballroom with her chin lofted into the air.

Caroline stomped her foot for a minute then counted to 100 before smoothing down her silk skirt and heading back inside. Elizabeth contemplated everything she had just seen and shook her head. It wasn't such a shock to see scheming ladies at a ball, but such flagrant acts where anyone could see were dangerous. Both ladies would have lost their standing if anyone but Elizabeth had overheard such admissions. Surely if any of the numerous Countesses in attendance had been in Elizabeth's spot enjoying the cool air they would now both be packing for exile from London Society.

After making her way back inside, Elizabeth spies her husband on the dance floor once again, this time with Lady Fiona. One look around the room confirmed that Lady Matlock had taken over the male socializing corner and is now practically lining up the young ladies in order to make Darcy dance the rest of the evening. Another look confirms that Georgiana is dancing with Lord Bristol and is not immediately in need of Elizabeth. Since she truly knows very few people in the room and many of them are ignoring her due to her supposed status anyway, Elizabeth decides to go over to Richard who was deep in conversation with Anne de Bourgh.

After the set was done, Darcy brought his dance partner back to the small grouping including Elizabeth and his cousins. Even though it was proper to escort a young lady back to her guardian after a dance, he was drawn towards Elizabeth's twinkling laughter and Richard's booming voice telling some embellished anecdote about the cadets newly joined to his regiment.

Forgetting himself for a moment due to the stress of the last hour, Darcy address the whole group informally. "Now Elizabeth, you must remember that whatever Richard tells you, it is a lie. Don't believe one word. Anne, tell her how poorly our wayward cousin represents the truth."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean Darcy. I'm one of the King's finest, see how many shiny medals they have given me!? Such a man wouldn't lie to gentil ladies would he?" Richard winked at his cousin then stepped forward to bestow a low bow over his other cousin's hand and handle the introductions. "Lady Fiona, may I say you look lovely tonight and you dance wonderfully. Let me introduce you to my other Fitzwilliam cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh, and you already know the lovely Miss Elizabeth Bennet. Ladies, may I present Lady Fiona Finch, cousin to me by my mother's brother, the Earl of Nottingham."

After cursory curtsies all around, the group returned to their humorous discussion of Richard's inept soldiers, boys not yet 18 who may well go to war in France before they were able to grow beards unless the men there now could capture Napoleon and finally put an end to this bloody war. It was an easy conversation and for the first time in nearly 36 hours, Darcy started to relax. So much so that he forgot himself for a moment and leaned close to ask Elizabeth a question regarding Georgiana's current dance partner. Whatever Elizabeth said seemed to placate the nervous brother and he went back to listening to his cousin. Lady Fiona, whose attention never really wavered from Darcy even while appearing to attend to the Colonel, saw the interchange and noted how informal they were with each other in this comfortable grouping. She began to wonder exactly what position Miss Elizabeth had taken in the Darcy house and whether she could use that to her advantage later.

When the strings of the band announced the supper set, Darcy decided to continue being selfish and acquire his wife's hand for a second dance then sit with her during the midnight meal. To everyone looking on, it appeared that the Master of Pemberley overlooked his heiress cousin and his Aunt's favorite titled niece to dance the all-important supper set with his employee. Lady Catherine nearly tripped on her hemline trying to stop the tragedy before the couple made it to the dance line but she didn't make it in time. With a loud huff and a stomp of her cane, she marched in the direction of Anne intent on giving her daughter a piece of her mind for allowing Darcy to get away, but she was once again thwarted, this time by Richard making a dramatic show of securing his cousin Anne's hand for the

supper set.

If Darcy had been paying attention to the room instead of focusing exclusively on his lovely wife, he might have seen the fury etched onto one Aunt's face and the disapproval on the other's. Or how both of his beloved cousins were trying desperately to not laugh at Lady Catherine. Many of the matchmaking mammas were sporting completions close in color to Caroline Bingley's hair and their daughters looked as if the refreshments table was supplied with nothing but lemons. Several faces belonging to Darcy's lifelong male friends showed varying degrees of suspicion without any real malice. And one kindly old face, who had seen enough of the London Marriage Mart to know what loved looked like on a dance floor, looked on with a mixture of pity and hope.

The other thing Darcy missed, that would have certainly been of the upmost importance to him, was that Georgiana was again paired with Mr. Bernard Finch. They talked and laughed as they danced and seemed to share the same slightly dazed look whenever the dance required that they clasp hands for a few moments.

All 3 Darcys plus Mr. Finch manage to find each other inside the massive dining room and soon they are blissfully surrounded, or protected depending on your perspective, on all sides by Charles Bingley, Richard, and Anne. Lady Fiona takes the seat next to her brother and Caroline is forced to sit next to her own brother. At least she is now seated only one chair away from the Hostess and can easily converse with the Countess.

Caroline decides that now is the best time for executing her plan to force a June house party at Pemberley. She would need Lady Matlock as the driving force for such an event since Mr. Darcy would certainly never agree to such a thing on his own. Now to convince Lady Matlock that a house party would be the perfect cap to Georgiana's debut.

"Lady Matlock, this has been the most delightful evening. Thank you for including my family in the invitation. Seeing such a wonderful friend officially become a member of society has been truly an honor." If the sickly sweet look on Caroline's face could drip, there would have already a slip and fall hazard under the Lady's chair. "Such a beautiful debut deserves an equally stunning end cap. Have you and Miss Darcy given any thought to an End of the Season House Party at Matlock? Or better yet, at Pemberley? It would give Miss Darcy a chance to play hostess and the Pemberley gardens are particularly

lovely in the summer.”

Elizabeth was 2 seats from Caroline with Charles sitting in between. The two listened on, one with amusement and one with dread, but could not intervene in the conversation since neither was seated close enough to Lady Matlock to politely address the Countess.

“You make a very good point Miss Bingley. There have been few opportunities for Georgie to host guests at Pemberley since becoming of an appropriate age to do so. And heavens knows my recluse of a nephew only ever invites hunting parties devoid of eligible women to his estate. I shall think on the matter and discuss it with Georgiana.” In reality, Lady Matlock was already mentally going through the available cardstock she had seen at the stationer’s last week and deciding whether they should plan to leave a full two weeks before the official end of the season or stay for the Regent’s ball that was always held on the last Friday of June. Her brother, Lord Nottingham, liked to attend every year but if missing this year meant his daughter could become engaged to Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley, she believed he would willingly leave Town early.

Darcy was blissfully unaware of the conversation between Caroline and his Aunt since he was deeply engaged in conversation with Mr. Bernard Finch and Georgiana over the Charter Act, newly introduced to Parliament this season. The Act would renew the East India Company’s charter but reduce their monopoly to only Indian Tea and goods from China. Mr. Finch had been involved in drafting some of the humanitarian provisions intended to provide money for the education of Indian children and for advancing native literature published in both Hindi and English. Darcy was mostly interested in the economic impacts of the new Charter, both as an investor in the East India Company, as well as other trade businesses, and as a consumer of imported goods. Perhaps he should pay Edward a visit for the express purpose of discussing how this might impact Gardiner Imports.

Georgiana at the moment cared little for the long-term viability of the East India Company or her brother’s varied investments. Instead, she was entranced hearing of Mr. Finch’s passion in using his career for the betterment of society and the benefit of children half the world away. With a dreamy look in her eyes, Georgiana asked a number of pointed questions about how such laws are consummated and when they could expect that actual schools would open their doors to Indian children. Elizabeth recognized the look of adoration on Georgie’s face. It was the same expression often looking back at her from her vanity

seat. Perhaps the Darcy's farce would come to an end much sooner than any of them expected. Lord help them all when William figured out the truth.

As the evening turned into night and the night gave way to the first rays of the sun, Georgiana's official debut ball came to a close. Darcy had been forced to dance with several additional eligible ladies but never extended a second dance to anyone other than Elizabeth and Georgiana. In fact, he would not have even extended that curtesy to his sister if Elizabeth hadn't stopped him from taking her onto the dance floor for the final set. The end to the evening was a waltz set and Darcy was certainly not going to share such a dance with anyone other than his fetching wife. As that would have become their *third* dance of the night, Elizabeth was able to knock some sense back into her husband before she shooed him away to claim Georgie.

Lady Matlock had told Darcy that she intended to plan an end of the season house party in Derbyshire for Georgiana but divulged no specifics. It was only through the overhead supper conversation that Elizabeth was able to give actual details on their way home. Darcy was none too happy about being forced to endure continuing their farce into the late summer at what should be their safe haven. After the events of the last few days he had been ready on multiple occasions to forget the whole ridiculous affair and fun a wedding announcement in the London Times and he was certainly not going to allow anyone to treat his wife as if she were a servant in her own home! But Elizabeth placated him just like she had each time before. It would only be for a short while, and they would not place any guests in the family wing so at least they should have their private sitting room as an escape in the evenings and early mornings. Besides, she was sure that Georgie's debut was a wonderful success and they would not have to continue with their deception into the next year. In fact, Elizabeth mused silently, she wouldn't be surprised if Georgie and the sweet Mr. Bernard Finch came to an understanding much sooner than the scheduled house party. Then the three Darcy's could welcome their guests to Pemberley as a unified family for extended socializing in the breathtaking Derbyshire countryside and perhaps for an equally breathtaking wedding.

Chapter 17: Introductions

Chapter Summary

Georgiana gets her first morning callers.

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

11 May 1813

Tuesday is Miss Darcy's day at home for callers. This is the first time she and Elizabeth have actually been at home for this purpose. Last week they had not yet been on any of their own social calls or dinners, so there was no one to come. But the Darcy's had been to several events in the last week since Georgie's presentation and the ball including dinner each night at the home of some family acquaintance or another that made a day of waiting necessary.

Promptly at 11am, Elizabeth's Aunt Madeline and sisters, Jane and Mary, were shown into the parlor. Not surprisingly, Charles showed up shortly afterwards and managed to get Darcy out of his study to socialize with the ladies. Even though several members of the party were privy to less than the whole truth surrounding the Darcy's situation, everyone had at least the understanding that Elizabeth and Darcy were engaged with Edward's full blessing. Therefore, the environment in the comfortable parlor had a distinctly familial feeling without any of the pretentiousness of creating an indifferent air so fashionable amongst the *ton*. They were all having a grand time.

Close to noon, the door knocker was heard once again by the diligent Mr. Simpson. Shortly, the room of happy friends was disturbed by the announcement of Lord Bristol and his sister, Lady Grace.

Ever since Georgiana's debut ball 9 days ago, Lady Grace had been trying to get an audience with Darcy. Her dance set had been cut short by her own ploy, then her ploy had been foiled by the biggest social climber in the *ton*, Miss Caroline Bingley! Losing the advantage when she had it was a big blow to Lady Grace's ambition. Darcy's Aunts, Lady Matlock and Lady Catherine, both had their own agenda for Darcy's future bride and had been making it difficult for any lady, other than Lady Fiona, Lady Miranda, and Miss de Bourgh, to get more than a few seconds of private conversation with the man. In the

4 subsequent evenings that Lady Grace and Mr. Darcy had been in company together, they had not even shared a formal greeting.

Saturday evening, the whole of London had been at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden to see the new Italian opera by Carlo Coccia, *Arrighetto*. Most of the *ton* had been excited to see the production because it was rumored that the famed Italian tenor, Tommaso Berti, who originated the leading role at the opera's premier in Venice, would be performing for London's opening night. Lady Grace had been excited because the opera was reportedly only one act long and the Earl of Matlock's box was only 2 down from her brother's box.

The whole *ton* knew that Mr. Darcy had always taken his operas with his Matlock family since his father's death. The Darcy's traditional box was still maintained by the Darcy family but had been let back to the opera house to sell for the past 5 seasons. Lady Grace had meticulously planned her introduction into the Matlock box which she hoped would end with an accepted invitation to the Darcy's to join her and her brother in their nearly empty box.

It made sense.

Lord Bristol was expected to court Miss Darcy, apparently with the full support of her Aunts given how easy it was for Goodwin and Georgiana to find themselves conversing throughout their evenings in company together in a sharp contrast to her own inability to garner any attention from Mr. Darcy. Naturally, Mr. Darcy wouldn't allow his baby sister to accompany an unmarried man to his private theater box. So, both brother and sister would end up relocating to the more spacious position conveniently devoid of any meddlesome aunts and rich, attractive cousins-by-marriage.

Unfortunately for Lady Grace, when she finally managed to elbow her way into the Matlock box, there was only Lord and Lady Matlock, their second son Colonel Fitzwilliam, their daughter Lady Marianne, with Lady Catherine and Miss Anne de Bourgh. All of the people Lady Grace absolutely did not want to see. After false pleasantries from the ladies and hearty welcomes shared between Goodwin and Richard, Lady Grace asked about the whereabouts of Miss Georgiana Darcy. Surely such an accomplished debutant would not dare to miss opening night of the Royal Opera Company!?

Lady Catherine shrilly informed the Bristols that Darcy had taken back his box now that Georgiana was out. It was on the other side the

theater from the Matlock and Bristol boxes, third back from the stage. Lady Anne Darcy had been a true lover of the theater and her doting husband had secured the best box he could each season, moving closer and closer to the stage, until finally settling on the one now sporting the Darcy crest on the curtain. The son shares his mother's love of music and performance art, so has dutifully paid the annual maintenance dues to maintain the right to use his mother's box whenever he felt the inclination. Throughout the years, the elder Mr. Darcy had taken his children to see many performances on nights not filled with the social elite of the ton, purely for the enjoyment and later to feel close to their departed mother. Likewise, Darcy had taken Georgiana many times over the last 5 years, just not on nights marked for premier social interaction. The siblings would sit in their big box with 9 seats, just the two of them, and remember happy times with their parents.

Just as Lady Catherine finished her mini-tirade about how it was ridiculous for Darcy and Georgiana to sit all alone in that huge box when their closest relations and dearest friends were all over here with plenty of seats to accommodate the siblings and even the companion if Georgiana insisted on bringing her, the Darcy box curtain was pulled back to reveal a rather merry party entering. Lady Grace, Lady Matlock, and Lady Catherine all looked intently at the cast of persons entering one of the most exclusive and visible set of seats in the whole theater. Mr. Darcy's tall frame could easily be seen holding back the curtain for Miss Darcy, her companion, two fashionable young ladies, a fashionable middle-aged couple, Mr. Charles Bingley, and Mr. Bernard Finch. Lady Marianne was the first to voice the question everyone was thinking.

"Who is that beautiful blond lady in the dove grey dress?" No one in the immediate company could answer.

Truthfully, it was the Gardiners, Jane, and Mary who had been asked to accompany the Darcys to the opera. Charles had been invited at the last minute to join them, though he knew Jane would be in Darcy's box so had planned to sit with them whether or not he had a formal invitation. Mr. Finch was the only true surprise of the evening. Elizabeth had seen the Nottinghams exiting their coach as Darcy and Edward had stopped to speak to a business associate in the lobby. The Earl, Countess, Viscount, Captain, and Lady Fiona exited without so much as looking back at the youngest brother as they strode directly up the massive steps to the building. Thankfully the crowd in the lobby was very large and Lady Fiona failed to glimpse the Darcy party, otherwise they would have assuredly been detained until well

after the overture was through. Mr. Finch had held back a moment to speak to the coachman then turned to find his family out of sight. Elizabeth quickly took Georgiana's hand and made a smooth interception of the sweet solicitor.

Both young people blushed at seeing each other again and only spoke for a few moments before Darcy came looking for his wife and sister. Darcy was not completely blind to the moods of the women in his life, so at Georgiana's slightly dejected countenance and Elizabeth's wide eyes bobbing between Georgiana and Mr. Finch, he decided to issue the intelligent, well-mannered solicitor an invitation for their last seat.

The evening had been a smashing success for the inhabitants of the Darcy box. Mary, Georgiana, and Mr. Finch sat in the front row caught up in the music and the story unfolding on stage. Since Mr. Finch spoke fluent Italian, he was continually leaning close to the ladies to translate for them, which neither thought a bother in the least.

Charles and Jane enjoyed each other's quiet company and sat closer than strict propriety would allow, but since her guarding was sat right next to the couple, no one said anything about the situation.

Madeline and Edward were certainly enjoying the performance but more enjoying seeing their nieces, who until recently had very little in their lives but grief and hardship, in such happy repose.

Darcy and Elizabeth had taken the last 2 seats in the box, behind the other guests and mostly out of sight to all in the theater except a few in the first and second boxes on the opposite side of the room. Elizabeth was overjoyed at seeing the opera from such an advantageous position. Being a woman of slight stature, the seating previously obtained by her family on the floor level afforded mostly a view of the back of someone's head. From the Darcy's box she could see the entire stage and much of the orchestra. Elizabeth had watched in raptures as Berti sang of hopeless love and ruined fortunes then cried a few small tears as the lovers onstage found their way to happiness. Darcy had watched Elizabeth.

Lady Grace had watched Mr. Darcy.

Or more accurately, Lady Grace had watched the dark spot on the outer wall of the Darcy box that hid Mr. Darcy from her sight. After the final curtain call, Lady Grace had tried desperately to get across the upper level to the Darcy box but she was too late. The Darcy's had taken the side stairs meant for the servants down to the carriage lane.

This was an old trick Lady Anne and the elder Mr. Darcy had used to get away from the crowd quickly after a society event. The entire Darcy party, including Charles and Mr. Finch, was safely ensconced, if a bit squished, in the largest Darcy carriage and rolling away from Covent Garden towards the fabulous dinner waiting for them at Darcy house before Lady Grace could even get past the mouth of the grand stairs.

But her perseverance was finally paying off. There he was, in a small group setting, no perceived competitors for his affections, and conveniently sitting alone on one end of a 2 person settee.

With barley a bob to Georgiana as the assumed hostess, who was also supposed to be her friend, Lady Grace went straight for the open seat by Darcy. In her haste, she passed too close to Elizabeth, who was sitting in her favorite chair by the window to catch the mid-day sun while sewing some baby clothes for little Thomas. Lady Grace's hem was caught on the tip of Elizabeth's largest embroidery needle which had not made it fully into the basket. A sharp tearing sound rendered the room quiet in an instant. Lady Grace's favorite silk calling dress now has a large tear at the bottom.

Immediately, the Lady became enraged. "Look at what your carelessness has done to my gown! How could you be so clumsy with the Darcy's guests? You should not be sitting so near the company with such implements lying about. I'm sure that with so many obviously intimate friends about today, your presence is not even required by Miss Darcy!" If the room had turned in startled curiosity at the sound of the fabric tearing, they were now staring in shocked silence at how Lady Grace was treating Elizabeth in the parlor of her own home.

Before Darcy could explode in anger and forcibly expel the daughter and sister of an Earl from the front door of his home, Charles decided the best course of action was to completely ignore Lady Grace and loudly introduce his friend, Goodwin Hervey, the Earl of Bristol, to **Miss Elizabeth's** Aunt, Mrs. Madeline Gardiner, and **Miss Elizabeth's** two sisters, Miss Jane and Miss Mary Bennet.

At Mr. Bingley's forced introductions, Lady Grace's angry tirade stopped. She looked around the room critically and had to admit that the young lady named Mary did bear a striking resemblance to Miss Darcy's companion. Lady Grace was familiar with Mr. Bingley and decided he would likely know the names and relations of the persons within the drawing room of his closest friend. She spent a moment on

the confused thought of why in the world would Mr. Darcy and Miss Darcy be entertaining their employee's family at the fashionable hour. But then quickly decided the situation was in her favor since the Gentleman must be dying for intelligent and sophisticated company amidst such obviously low born and ill connected persons.

Turning on her heel, Lady Grace resumed her original path to the seat next to Darcy on the settee. The Master had risen upon the entry of his guests into the room, of course, and now bowed low to the Lady while she gracefully glided into her chosen seat. The depth of his motion was interpreted by the Lady as a sign of deference to her title and also as a romantic gesture meant to signal the rest of the room of her suitability as a contender for the future Mistress of this house. She smiled coquettishly and looked up at Darcy through her dark eyelashes as she leaned to the perfect angle for viewing her décolletage on his assent. In reality, Darcy had bowed so low to ensure that Lady Grace could not see the rage evident upon his visage. He spent a moment while bent to steady his breathing and unclench his jaw. Finally, Darcy felt master of his emotions once again and rose. Instead of again taking his prior seat, one he had chosen specifically for the perfect view it afforded him of Elizabeth glowing in the sunshine, he turned his attention to greeting Lord Bristol.

This left Lady Grace sitting directly next to a very angry Mrs. Gardiner with Elizabeth across from her. Jane had been sitting near Charles when the Bristols entered, while Mary and Georgie had been practicing duets on the pianoforte in the corner of the room. After a moment of uncomfortable silence coming from the settee, the two youngest girls decided to abandon their play to join the other guests. Georgiana took the seat on the settee recently vacated by her brother, while Mary decided to join Jane and the men, taking the seat between her sister and the Earl.

Lady Grace hid her annoyance at losing the advantage of sitting so closely to Mr. Darcy poorly. She was not particularly interested in making small talk with the shy baby sister. Surely a man of Mr. Darcy's wealth would already be in talks with several families regarding his sister's marriage. Everyone knew that her brother was one of the contenders for the young thing's hand. Her mother had been talking to the Lady Matlock about the match since last season. Though the love between the Darcy siblings was reportedly strong, no man in his 20s wanted the burden of caring for an awkward young girl. If Lady Grace was lucky, they could be free of the burden of keeping her before Christmastide and then the new Mistress of Pemberley could enjoy the spoils of her new position without having

to try and please another woman. Alternatively, the thought of speaking to Elizabeth or her aunt didn't even cross the Lady's high born mind.

Before Lady Grace could truly regain her composure, she was brought back to the company before her by Elizabeth's soft voice.

Even though she was not formally recognized as such, Elizabeth was technically the Mistress of Darcy House and could not let a guest within be in want of anything. So, with a deep breath and silent prayer for patience, Elizabeth spoke to Lady Grace.

"My Lady, I am truly sorry that your dress has been damaged. I am sure that I have fabric and thread to perfectly match your gown. If you would like to retire for a short while, I can have your dress repaired before you and the Earl must leave for your next engagement."

Georgiana took Elizabeth's lead and offered to stay with the Lady in her private sitting room above stairs while the dress was repaired. "Of course we shall have some tea and sweet meats brought to us. Lilian and Marianne shall have your dress looking like new before the pot gets cold I'm sure."

Lady Grace was not happy at all about the prospect of being shuttled off above stairs for the remainder of the half hour where she would have no hope of regaining Darcy's attention. She smiled falsely at Georgiana then replied, "Please do not make yourself uneasy Miss Darcy. I'm sure your companion was not malicious, just careless." Turning a critical eye to Elizabeth, Lady Grace looked down her nose at the servant. "This gown was made by Mme. Devy using some of the most expensive silk she had available so I highly doubt that you have anything to match it anyway."

"Actually, my Lady, Elizabeth has a beautiful evening gown made of exactly that silk. In fact, I'm sure that both gowns were made from the very same bolt of fabric since there was only one bolt in the shipment from China that came to London this March. She wore it just the other night when we all went to see the Opera. Didn't Mme. Devy provide you an extra half yard of all the fabrics she used for just this purpose Elizabeth?" Madeline Gardiner spoke in the nonchalant manner fashionable amongst the *ton* while lazily stirring a lump of sugar into her tea. Elizabeth's aunt may have looked unaffected, but inside she was absolutely seething at the rudeness of this pretend princess.

Now it was Lady Grace's turn to seethe. She had fallen in love with

the pale green silk the moment she had seen it in the shop window but by the time she got an appointment with the dressmaker there wasn't enough for a full evening gown as she had originally desired. She had to settle for a short hem, slim summer calling dress with a contrasting fabric for the bodice and no matching shall. Now come to find out that this little nobody had HER dress, probably with a matching shall and evening gloves, AND an extra half yard for repairs! How in the world had she been able to convince Mr. Darcy to spend such an exorbitant amount on a mere servant?!? "Well Miss Elaina, aren't you lucky to have such a generous employer to spend nearly half again your annual salary on one dress. Miss Darcy, did you accompany your companion when she shopped for her own clothes this season or did she go on her own for her fittings?"

"Lady Grace, I'm not sure of the purpose for your question, but *Elizabeth* and I always go to Mme. Devy's shop together. My brother is exactly as generous as Elizabeth deserves given her place in his house and gladly pays the modiste's bill. Mrs. Gardiner, wasn't the green silk for that particular dress a gift from you and Mr. Gardiner? I believe it was one of the gowns already finished by the time we made it to our appointment last month."

"Why yes, Miss Darcy, that particular silk was a gift from my husband and I. As was the lovely pale blue silk used for one of your evening gowns and the high quality rose muslin that you each had made into a sweet morning dress. I quite like the yellow trim you chose but Lizzie's dark green lace also makes a lovely contrast with the rose."

Lady Grace took a moment to critically inspect the woman sitting to her left. Until this minute, she had barely given a second thought to anyone in the room except Mr. Darcy and his sister. Now, as she examined the Aunt of Miss Darcy's companion, Lady Grace noticed that she was an attractive woman of a slightly older age than Mr. Darcy, though not much older, with an extremely fashionable calling dress made of the highest quality silk usually only found in the drawing rooms and parlors of the nobility. The companion, Elizabeth apparently, was similarly wearing a beautiful gown of red silk with roses embroidered around the hem and bodice. A glance at the ladies identified as Elizabeth's sisters confirmed that both were wearing well made, fashionable dresses of silk in flattering colors for each sister's particular complexion. Convinced that the family of Miss Darcy's companion was somehow leaching off of Mr. Darcy, Lady Grace sat up straighter and rose her voice above what was considered polite so that the Gentleman could hear her and respond appropriately.

“And who exactly is your husband Mrs. Gardiner? I have surely never heard your name spoken in the *ton* before. From the quality of the silk you and your nieces wear, I’m sure that only the wealthiest of the nobility could afford to legitimately purchase such items. How is it that the daughter and sister of the Earl of Bristol cannot get a full evening gown of the same silk used to make dresses for servants?” If Lady Grace’s intention was to get back Mr. Darcy’s attention, she had it now.

Madeline Gardiner smiled so sweetly that it was borderline sickening. “My Lady, my husband is Mr. Edward Gardiner, the third generation, sole proprietor of Gardiner Imports which supplies the London market with a variety of goods from India, China, Spain, France before the war of course, and most recently Italy and Greece, an expansion that was mostly financed by investments by Mr. Bingley, Mr. Darcy, and the Duke of Grafton. Every bolt of silk ever used in Mme. Devy’s shop, and her father’s tailor shop before her, has been bought from Gardiner Imports. If you think that the only people in London with enough money to access the finest Chinese silks have titles, then you are sorely misinformed. Most of the ladies in my close social circle regularly wear gowns of a much higher quality and fashionable cut than half of the wives of men in the House of Lords. Our husbands do not have to support impoverished estates that rarely make enough to feed the tenants let alone pay the extraordinary rents levied on them from the nobility.”

Before an actual fight could break out in her parlor, Elizabeth decided to quickly change the make-up of the parties. She exclaimed, rather loudly, that she must attend to Mrs. Simpson and see about more tea and some sweet meats. “Mary, Georgie, while I am gone, please entertain our guests with that lovely duet you were practicing earlier. And Aunt Maddie, were you not saying that you knew the harp line to that same piece? Perhaps it would be nice to have a small exhibit for the Earl and Lady. Come my Lord, Mr. Bingley, have these seats here so you can more easily hear the ladies. I shall return shortly.” If anyone was confused at the paid companion taking the active role of hostess, they were more relieved at the turn in the conversation to make a comment.

Everyone rearranged themselves according to Elizabeth’s suggestion and the tension began to abate. Charles and Jane took chairs near the window, close enough to the music to be able to enjoy the exhibition but away from the crowd so to enjoy some quiet conversation. Darcy took up a position at the fireplace, behind Lady Grace, with a view of both the ladies playing music and the door through which Elizabeth

had disappeared. Lord Bristol took the exact seat to which Elizabeth had pointed in order to have a very pleasant view of the ladies at the pianoforte.

Before his sister had somehow started an argument, for the Earl knew it was his sister at fault for whatever transpired between herself and Miss Elizabeth's Aunt, Goodwin Hervey, the Honorable Earl of Bristol, was having a wonderful time speaking with the Bennet sisters and his good friends. Since taking the title to Bristol, Goodwin had only felt as if he were the fox hearing the horn when in the presence of young eligible ladies. It had not always been such. For nearly his entire life, the second son had been invisible, so the contrast was quite disconcerting.

In fact, this phenomena was a common topic of conversation between himself, Charles, Darcy, and Richard. During their university days, Goodwin and Richard had been overlooked by the ladies due to their obstacles in inheriting while Charles had been overlooked because of his heritage. Darcy had been pursued constantly by the most beautiful and wealthy ladies of the *ton*, even before his father's untimely death. The other three had shown little sympathy for Darcy's plight. They understood the need to help protect their friend from attempts to entrap him, but true sympathy had not come until three days after the funeral for Goodwin's father and brother. The young Earl had been accompanying his mother to the modiste for a private appointment to have several of her dresses turned into mourning attire and obtain black lace for trimming others when he was accosted on Bond street by several young women wishing to "pay their respects" to the Dowager and new Earl. Goodwin was so unaccustomed to such treatment that he merely stood in the street gazing at the growing mass of ladies and matchmaking mammas.

Since then he has been unable to go to any social event without constantly having to fend off women and every simple morning call turned into rumors of affection and courtship. Thankfully his good friend did not laugh at his change of circumstance. Instead Darcy had clapped him on the back and given him sound advice for avoiding the matchmakers.

Today, though, had been a wonderful morning. In the carriage ride over, Goodwin was worried about speaking to Darcy about his sister. Goodwin knew that several members of both their families expected him to pay court to Miss Darcy. She was beautiful and accomplished to be sure, but he knew their temperaments would not match. He also knew how protective Darcy was his sister and Goodwin did not want

to inadvertently create any hurt feelings or allow gossip from his mother and Darcy's aunt harm the Lady's reputation. He was quite relieved that upon their entrance, neither Darcy made any attempt at putting Miss Darcy in his path. Goodwin still endeavored to speak to his friend bluntly at some point, but upon seeing the lovely Bennets, he decided to stay in company for a while.

It was obvious to Goodwin that Charles and the oldest sister, Miss Jane Bennet, were courting. They had been sitting slightly apart from the group when he and Lady Grace had entered the room, and even after the dress ripping incident, continued to sit close and speak together softly. Darcy and Miss Mary Bennet had ended up sitting near Goodwin after the youngest ladies had given up the pianoforte. Since Miss Darcy was attending to Lady Grace and Darcy was very distracted with his sister's disturbing attempts to get his attention, Miss Mary had done Goodwin both the service of serving him a lovely cup of tea and of speaking to him on a surprising range of topics for the short duration of their conversation. They discovered that they both shared a love of God's scriptures, both preferred the poetry of Edward Perronet to Byron, and both believed that they should like nothing more than to spend their lives working for God's church.

Miss Mary had not fawned over him. She did not agree with everything that he said and in fact she had challenged him of the true meaning of one of Perronet's most famous pieces. Goodwin had to be truthful that she was not as beautiful as her older sisters, but he found her modesty attractive and she had beautiful features with a pleasing look in her eyes. She had even laughed at something he said, really laughed instead of tittering like so many ridiculous ladies of the *ton* were wont to do. This Miss Mary Bennet had no pretense. She was genuine and it appeared her sister was just a sweet and genuine in her interaction with Charles.

More to Goodwin's amazement, neither of the sisters were trying to get Darcy's attention in the least, even though he was the most wealthy, most eligible man in the room. Even the Earldom of Bristol could not touch Pemberley for size of landholdings and annual income. The generations of Darcy men had built an empire that spanned nearly half of Derbyshire and the most recent generations were not afraid of investing some of their money in trade industries. Goodwin's father had been a staunch traditionalist but the young Earl had seen the unbridled growth in mining, milling, imports, and retail through his studies as well as his friend's experiences. Charles was an unimaginably wealthy man due to the Yorkshire mill profits and Darcy's trade investments had grown to almost match Pemberley's

yearly income in just the time since his father's passing. Plus Darcy was able to keep his tenant rents reasonable through supplementing with investment income which meant more food on the table for the hard working families that held up the gentry.

Goodwin was convinced that the path forward for the upper classes was to take a significant interest in the non-agricultural portions of the English economy and help along the development of stable employment for the middle and lower classes. His sister would be appalled if she knew he had invested a good sum of money in several wool mills and one mining operation, but since the money he made last year was being used to fund her dowry, he was going to continue investing.

Yes indeed, Goodwin thought to himself as he listened to a lovely performance by Miss Mary, Miss Darcy, and Mrs. Gardiner, this was the most pleasant morning he had ever spent out calling.

Chapter 18: Rumors

Chapter Summary

Lady Catherine has her say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

3 June 1813

The day to depart London for Pemberley was just 7 days away, one week exactly. 168 hours, 7 peaceful family breakfasts, 7 likely enjoyable luncheons at White's, and 7 terribly stressful dinners at some notable Townhouse where there will likely be at least one lady trying to get his attention or, worse, some dandy trying to get Georgiana's. As infuriating as it was to watch his baby sister flirt with, generally upstanding, men of their acquaintance, what really made Darcy's blood boil was watching less upstanding men flirt with his wife. The kind of 'gentlemen' attending the caliber of events to which the Darcys were invited, who spend their time flirting with the pretty paid companions are not men looking to increase the status of a genteel servant. They are looking for women who are generally unchaperoned and could be persuaded to engage in an intimate liaison.

Elizabeth kept telling him not to worry about her fidelity, which of course he did not question in the slightest, or her safety, which was a slightly higher concern. Truly he was more incensed at the unashamed rudeness of the behaviour. But alas, as the third thing Elizabeth kept telling him, it was all too common an occurrence and the unusual thing would be his heated defense of a woman not his sister or his acknowledged wife.

He wanted to call each one of the degenerates out for the blatant disrespect shown a woman under his protection and damn the consequences!!

Or they could just stop the pretending and announce their marriage, which was his preferred solution. But Elizabeth kept telling him that they were so close to the end it would be a shame to waste all their efforts now. And Elizabeth really was saying sensible things with

serenity and sweet kisses each night. So Darcy listened to his wife and counted the hours until he could pack his family into a carriage and take them home to the peace of Pemberley.

If only he could cancel the bloody house party which would be following them for an additional 2 weeks.

His aunt had gotten it into her head that Georgiana needed to host the most perfect house party for all of their most dear relations and friends. So naturally nearly 60 people would be invading his home for the last 2 weeks of June. All 6 Nottinghams, 4 Derbys, 4 Bristols, 5 Matlocks plus Anne de Bourgh, 2 Bingleys, 4 Hursts, 1 Lady Sefton plus companion and all their individual servants would be coming together in a large caravan to Pemberley. At least Georgiana had been able to issue his own invitations instead of having their Aunt Matlock order them. That way the Darcys were able to include Jane and Mary Bennet in the party without the Countess having any power to veto the ladies.

Now Darcy needed to figure out how to orchestrate a major catastrophe somewhere on the estate so that he can disappear for the entire event.

This morning was being dedicated to plans and letters detailing instructions to Mrs. Reynolds regarding said plans. Elizabeth and Georgie were organizing several picnics, outings to the local sights, and hopefully a traveling troupe of musicians for one of the last nights with dancing on the wide terrace. Darcy's only suggestion so far for an activity likely to be enjoyed by all was a chess tournament one evening after dinner.

Elizabeth had been making lists of instructions to Mrs. Reynolds for several days now and was finally putting the finishing touches on her nearly 5 page letter just as the doorknocker could be loudly heard from the study where all three Darcys were working. As it was nearly 1pm, certainly not the calling hour, and a Thursday instead of Tuesday, the family ignored the interruption. That is until it came barging into the room with the ridiculous thump-thump-thump of a cane and the shrieking voice of Lady Catherine.

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***Wilton Row, Belgravia, London***

***3 June 1813 – 11AM Sharp***

The Bingley's butler was used to many people coming in and out of the Townhouse and prided himself on knowing the relations of each person who graced his door with their presence. But this morning, he was sure he had never seen the supposed Lady before, nor had he ever even heard of her from the tittering amongst the various guests who frequented the home. But her card said she was sister to the Earl of Matlock and widow of an unknown Knight, so he let the lady into the parlor while he went in search of Miss Bingley.

At the mention of Lady Catherine, Caroline Bingley was thrown into a tizzy. Her normal day for receiving callers was Friday, not Thursday, and she was loathe to entertain this particular guest when she wanted to be sitting at her window watching the fashionable of London meander onto the Rotten Way. But one does not ignore a guest with a title in their home, so she gathered her things and proceeded into the parlor.

Lady Catherine had found the most ornate chair in the room and was sitting in it as if she were the Queen ready to receive ladies for presentation. Already Caroline was annoyed because usually she sat in that chair and commanded her parlor from a high position, but then again, you know what they say about "great" minds. In order to hide her annoyance, Caroline Bingley bowed deeply and greeted Darcy's aunt into her home, offering tea and sweet cakes.

"No thank you Miss Bingley, I would like no refreshment. You can be at no loss as to the reason for my visit this morning."

"Indeed, you are mistaken, Madam. I have not been at all able to account for the honour of seeing you here." Caroline tried to remain sweet but strong in her conviction that this was her house and she was not going to be bullied by this recluse.

"Miss Bingley," replied her Ladyship, in an angry tone, "you ought to know, that I am not to be trifled with. But however insincere you may choose to be, you shall not find me so. My character has ever been celebrated for its sincerity and frankness, and in a cause of such moment as this, I shall certainly not depart from it. A report of a most alarming nature reached me last night. I was told that not only was your brother on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Caroline Bingley, would, in all likelihood, be soon

afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you."

"If you believed it impossible to be true," said Caroline, colouring with astonishment and disdain, "I wonder you took the trouble of coming to our home which you have never before visited. What could your ladyship propose by it?"

"At once to insist upon having such a report universally contradicted."

"Your coming to Wilton Row, to see me and my brother," said Caroline coolly, "will be rather a confirmation of it; if, indeed, such a report is in existence." At this, Caroline flipped open her fan and began lazily fanning herself in order to try and cool the redness coming onto her cheeks.

"If! Do you then pretend to be ignorant of it? Has it not been industriously circulated by yourselves? Do you not know that such a report is spread to all of London?"

"I may have heard that it was."

"And can you likewise declare, that there is no foundation for it?"

"I do not pretend to possess equal frankness with your ladyship. You may ask questions which I shall not choose to answer."

"This is not to be borne. Miss Bingley, I insist on being satisfied. Has he, has my nephew, made you an offer of marriage?"

"Your ladyship has declared it to be impossible."

"It ought to be so; it must be so, while he retains the use of his reason. But your arts and allurements may, in a moment of infatuation, have made him forget what he owes to himself and to all his family. You may have drawn him in."

"If I have, I shall be the last person to confess it."

"Miss Bingley, do you know who I am? I have not been accustomed to such language as this. I am almost the nearest relation he has in the world, and am entitled to know all his dearest concerns."

“But you are not entitled to know mine; nor will such behaviour as this, ever induce me to be explicit.”

“Let me be rightly understood. This match, to which you have the presumption to aspire, can never take place. No, never. Mr. Darcy is engaged to my daughter. Now what have you to say?”

“Only this; that all of London knows that to be a lie.”

Lady Catherine hesitated for a moment, and then replied, “The engagement between them is of a peculiar kind. From their infancy, they have been intended for each other. It was the favourite wish of his mother, as well as of her's. While in their cradles, we planned the union: and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished in their marriage, to be prevented by a young woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family! Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends? To his tacit engagement with Miss De Bourgh? Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy? Have you not heard me say that from his earliest hours he was destined for his cousin?”

“Yes, and I had heard it before. But what is that to me? If there is no other objection to my marrying your nephew, I shall certainly not be kept from it by knowing that his mother and aunt wished him to marry Miss De Bourgh. You both did as much as you could in planning the marriage. Its completion depended on others. If Mr. Darcy is neither by honour nor inclination confined to his cousin, why is not he to make another choice? And if I am that choice, why may not I accept him?”

“Because honour, decorum, prudence, nay, interest, forbid it. Yes, Miss Bingley, interest; for do not expect to be noticed by his family or friends, if you wilfully act against the inclinations of all. You will be censured, slighted, and despised, by everyone connected with him. Your alliance will be a disgrace; your name will never even be mentioned by any of us.”

“These are heavy misfortunes,” replied Caroline. “But the wife of Mr. Darcy must have such extraordinary sources of happiness necessarily attached to her situation, that she could, upon the whole, have no cause to repine.”

“Obstinate, headstrong girl! I am ashamed of you! You are to understand, Miss Bingley, that I came here with the determined resolution of carrying my purpose; nor will I be dissuaded from it. I

have not been used to submit to any person's whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment.”

“That will make your ladyship's situation at present more pitiable; but it will have no effect on me.”

“I will not be interrupted. Hear me in silence. My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended, on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient -- though untitled -- families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections and a fortune tainted by trade. Is this to be endured! But it must not, shall not be. If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere in which you have been brought up.”

“In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. I have been raised as one of the elite of London and my brother was given a gentleman's education. My family in this generation is every bit the social equal of the Darcys.”

“True. Your brother has a gentleman's education but that does not make him a gentleman. Do not imagine me ignorant of your true situation.”

“Whatever my connections may be,” said Caroline, “if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to you.”

“Tell me once for all, are you engaged to him?”

Though Caroline would not, for the mere purpose of obliging Lady Catherine, have answered this question, she could not but say, after a moment's deliberation, “As of today, I am not.”

Lady Catherine seemed pleased. “And will you promise me, never to enter into such an engagement?”

“I will make no promise of the kind.”

“Miss Bingley I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman. But do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require.”



“And I certainly never shall give it. I am not to be intimidated into anything so wholly unreasonable. Do not think me blind. Your ladyship wants Mr. Darcy to marry your daughter; but would my giving you the wished-for promise make their marriage at all more probable? Supposing him to be attached to me, would my refusing to accept his hand make him wish to bestow it on his cousin? Allow me to say, Lady Catherine, that the arguments with which you have supported this extraordinary application have been as frivolous as the application was ill-judged. You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these. How far your nephew might approve of your interference in his affairs, I cannot tell; but you have certainly no right to concern yourself in mine. I must beg, therefore, to be importuned no farther on the subject.”

“Not so hasty, if you please. I have by no means done. To all the objections I have already urged, I have still another to add. I am no stranger to the particulars of your family’s assent into the *ton*. I know it all; that your father and grandfather were nothing but common mill workers who were able to secure financial gain by marrying into the merchant classes, and how your sister’s marriage to the Hursts bought your brother a gentleman’s education but he still earns his money from trade! And is such a man to be my nephew’s brother? Such a man may be a friend from university, but as a relation and then with connections to the honorable Earldom of Matlock?! Heaven and earth! -- of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?”

“You can now have nothing farther to say,” she resentfully answered. “You have insulted me in every possible method. I must beg you to leave my house.”

And she rose as she spoke. Lady Catherine rose also. Her ladyship was highly incensed. “You have no regard, then, for the honour and credit of my nephew! Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?”

“Lady Catherine, I have nothing farther to say. You know my sentiments.”

“You are then resolved to have him?”

Caroline replied with steel in her eyes, “Yes.”

“It is well. You refuse, then, to oblige me. You refuse to obey the

claims of duty, honour, and gratitude. You are determined to ruin him in the opinion of all his friends, and make him the contempt of the world.”

“Neither duty, nor honour, nor gratitude,” replied Caroline, “have any possible claim on me, in the present instance. No principle of either would be violated by my marriage with Mr. Darcy. And with regard to the resentment of his family, or the indignation of the world, if the former were excited by his marrying me, it would not give me one moment's concern -- and the world in general would have too much sense to join in the scorn.”

“And this is your real opinion! This is your final resolve! Very well. I shall now know how to act. Do not imagine, Miss Bingley, that your ambition will ever be gratified. I came to try you. I hoped to find you reasonable; but, depend upon it, I will carry my point.”

At this last declaration, Lady Catherine swept her skirts around the legs of the chair she had been occupying and strode from the room as if she owned the whole row of houses. Her cane made violent strikes on the parquet flooring as she left out the front door without even acknowledging the butler.

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## ***Darcy House, Mayfair, London***

### ***3 June 1813***

Lady Catherine was still shrieking at the top of her lungs several minutes after the inhabitants of Darcy's study had overcome the shock of the intrusion. Unfortunately no one had yet to decipher what it was that she was carrying on about. From the decided sway to her stance and the redness in her cheeks, Elizabeth decided it was time to intervene.

“My Lady, please, take this seat and I shall fetch you a refreshment. Would you prefer tea or perhaps a nice wine with which to calm yourself?” The large overstuffed winged back chair from the side of the room was moved to directly in front of the large desk where all three Darcy's had previously been working on preparations for the coming house party.

Though she stopped her high pitched speech, Lady Catherine's ire had not yet abated. "I never drink wine this early in the day, how ridiculous! A lady is liable to get drunk before she is even dressed for dinner. Whatever made you think this uneducated country maid was a suitable companion for Georgiana, William? Tea, Miss Elizabeth, and a strong brew with two lumps of sugar plus a measure of cream. Have the maid bring it and leave us, I must speak to my nephew without the help gossiping behind our backs."

Darcy and Georgiana were respectively furious and embarrassed by their aunt's treatment of the one person in the whole world who would have been able to kindly see to the comfort of the ridiculous woman. If Elizabeth was honest, the constant dismissals in her own home were beginning to grate on her person, but she kept reminding herself that it was all for the sake of their sisters.

Darcy had just about had enough of his relations demands this day and was fighting the urge to tell his Aunt to leave then never return. "Aunt Catherine, you can say your peace in front of Miss Elizabeth. She is more a member of the household than a servant and my house staff is very loyal in any case. Besides, your tirade that was continuous since stepping across the threshold has already divulged whatever you wanted to keep secret to anyone inside the house and quite possible the inhabitants of the next address as well. Now, please tell us calmly what has you in such a state."

"Tell me nephew, are you planning on offering for that awful Bingley woman? I won't have it you know, she is wholly unacceptable!!"

All three Darcy's were so relieved that this easily dispelled nonsense was what had Lady Catherine so infuriated, they each let out a surprised laugh. "Truly, Aunt Catherine, this is what you have become enraged about?! Some rumor, likely started by Caroline Bingley herself and believed by absolutely no one in the *ton*, that I am on the verge of declaring myself to her?!? Let me put your mind at ease, I do not now have plans to offer for her, nor will I ever entertain such a ridiculous notion. Caroline Bingley will turn into a bitter spinster waiting on my proposal."

Lady Catherine calmed somewhat, but was not nearly done with her interrogation of her nephew. "While that is a relief to hear I'm telling you, watch that harpy. She is the kind that would try to entrap you into marriage and if her sister's in-laws decide to get involved with any perceived scandal it shall take the total combined power of the Fitzwilliam, Darcy, and de Bourgh names to stop Lady Sefton."

“I assure you, I have known for quite some time that Miss Bingley is determined to have me and I never allow myself to be separated from the company during social engagements. Richard and Charles have always been diligent in staying with me when required so as to provide witness that I have never compromised any lady trying to entrap the Darcy fortune. These precautions have saved me from a number of plots since university and I do not intend to stop now.”

“If you would just hurry up and marry Anne none of this would even be an issue. There would be nothing to entrap, Georgiana could have a suitable chaperone, Miss Elizabeth could move on to more suitable employ, and Anne could be rightfully instilled at Pemberley as the new mistress.”

Any humor in the situation drained from Darcy in an instant and he was one again furious with his Aunt. “Lady Catherine, I have informed you on multiple occasions that it is not my intention to marry Anne. She is neither inclined towards me nor am I bound to her. There will never be a union between us so you should start looking elsewhere for her prospects.”

“You cannot turn your back on her now! All of London expects your marriage, I’ve even ordered the invitations for a lovely August wedding in Kent. I had hoped for a June wedding at St. Margaret’s with the wedding breakfast at Matlock house, but you have taken your time with the formal appeal and my sister Matlock could not be bothered to make the arraignments. Then the new St. Margaret’s bishop, who claims not to know me, refused to schedule the ceremony without confirmation from the groom! Well, my vicar in Hunsford was most obliging though and of course the Rosings Park servants could have the breakfast ready with hardly a day’s notice. After the ceremony, you will take your wedding trip to the lakes and return home to Pemberley before Michaelmas.”

“What did you say!?” It was Elizabeth that found her voice first and exclaimed the question each was screaming inside their heads.

“Did I not already dismiss you Miss Elizabeth? How unacceptable that you should speak to your employer’s family in such a tone. Really William, you must let her go this instance, publish the engagement announcement with the London papers to be run this week and let Anne welcome your guests to the House Party as the expected Mistresses. She can even tour the family apartments during the party and plan updates to be completed before you finish your wedding trip.”

“Aunt Catherine, Elizabeth is my companion to dismiss or keep by my side and in truth, she is a member of our family in such a way that we do not restrict her movements inside the house. I would never be so impolite as to send her away. You are not mistress of this house and no matter your relation to the master, your place is not to direct the members of our home. Now please apologize to Elizabeth for your unending rudeness.” Georgiana spoke with a calm directness that none had yet heard from the young lady. It suddenly struck Lady Catherine as very similar to her sweet, but determined, baby sister who never allowed anyone to abuse the Fitzwilliam or Darcy servants, from the most respectable upstairs staff to the lowliest stable boy. Lady Anne Darcy always said that each deserved respect and kindness for all their hard work making the lives of the family full of comfortable leisure.

The thought of her beloved baby sister whose life was cut tragically short by the whims of nature induced Lady Catherine to actually issue the demanded apology. “Forgive me Miss Elizabeth, this is your home and I should not assume the role of mistress where I do not rightfully hold that title.”

“Thank my Lady, I shall think on it no more.”

When the scene in front of him came to a close, Darcy forcibly brought the subject back to the original topic. “Lady Catherine, I must insist that you repeat your declaration regarding some invitations to a Kent wedding in August. Did I hear you correctly, that you have actually ORDERED invitations declaring my wedding to your daughter in about 2 months?!?”

“Yes William, I was worried that if you proposed to late in the Season I would never get them in time to be able to have the wedding when the orchids are in bloom. You know how much Anne loves the orchids in her father’s greenhouse.”

Fitzwilliam George James Darcy stood from his chair, gathered his full height, straightened his jacket and waste coat, and then fixed his Aunt with the most intimidating stare full of distain. “I will say this exactly one time more then the subject shall be forever closed and no one in this house shall even acknowledge you if you speak on it again. I will not marry Anne, ever, and nothing you do, neither rumors you have spread, nor invitations you have ordered, shall change my mind. I suggest you give up this fool’s errand before you actually hurt your daughter. Incidentally, I had no idea that Anne loved orchids, we are not overly fond of each other and rarely converse beyond mild pleasantries. Perhaps you were thinking of Richard. He is the

gentleman who often entertains our cousin during visits to Rosings Park. In fact, I bring him along most visits so to provide a buffer between Anne and myself. Good day Aunt. I hope you have a pleasant trip back to Kent.” Without another word, Darcy left the study and walked straight up the staircase to the family wing looking for relief in the one place even his overbearing Aunt would not follow, the Master’s suite.

“Aunt Catherine, my brother is very serious on this matter. You should allow my cousin Anne to direct her own future. She is a young woman who deserves to make decisions that will increase her happiness. This Season she has danced with some very eligible men and enjoyed the company of her Fitzwilliam family. Surely there is another gentlemen of her acquaintance that you would find an acceptable suitor whom Anne prefers to my brother. I believe I can name several right now, and some even with titles of their own. Lord Captain Thurston Finch comes to mind.”

Lady Catherine’s affronted face would have been comical if not for the disgust evident in her features. “An Army Captain! How ridiculous!”

Georgiana tried with mild success to hide her eye roll. “A decorated Army Captain with a valuable commission who is the son of the Earl of Nottingham. The second sons and even third sons deserve to find happy marriages too.”

“Well, perhaps I shall ask Anne what she prefers and allow her to produce a list of alternatives to William. But if word of your brother’s jilt of my Anne begins to damage her reputation I shall know how to act! I shall insist he do the honorable thing!”

This time Georgiana did not even try to stop the eye roll. “Aunt, not one person amongst the *ton* believes that my brother and my cousin are engaged, even under such particular circumstances upon which you like to expound. She shall not be ‘jilted’ by rumors amongst our social acquaintances.”

“Humph” Lady Catherine set down her tea cup, rapped her cane on the floor twice, and then rose from her seat. “I must be going, I’ve already spent much too long here to be polite. Thank you for tea, enjoy the rest of your afternoon dear.”

Georgiana rang for the doorman and accompanied her Aunt into the foyer to issue a proper goodbye.

Just before the grand Lady swept out to front door, she paused and

half turned her head and shoulders back towards Georgiana.

“Please let me say my dear, how much you remind me of my dear sister, Lady Anne, every day. You have certainly grown into a beautiful and graceful young lady.” Then, without even waiting for a reaction, Lady Catherine was over the threshold, down the front steps, and ushered into her waiting carriage before the lone tear began to stream down Georgiana’s cheek.

## Chapter End Notes

You may recognize much of the dialogue between Lady Catherine and Caroline Bingley in this chapter. It is taken almost verbatim from Jane Austin's original scene in P&P between Lady C and Elizabeth in the Longbourn garden, modified to fit the slightly changed situation (though not nearly as much as I would have thought would need to be modified).

# Chapter 19: The Most Beautiful Smile

## Chapter Summary

Checking in with Lydia in the North

## Chapter Notes

Thank you everyone for sticking with me. I have had a crazy few weeks since Thanksgiving at work and found no time to write. I'm hoping to have a calmer Christmas and perhaps finally finish this story close to the New Year.

*Fitzwilliam House, Scarborough, Yorkshire*

**3 June 1813**

Thomas is just over 12 weeks old. The new mother and baby have been very happy living near the coast with the Fitzwilliam family but some days it was hard being so far from her mother and sisters.

Lydia has received no letter from her mother aside from one a few months after she arrived asking her if she and Kitty could come to the seaside as it was not fair that Lydia got to travel so many beautiful places without expending some effort for her mother and sister. When Lydia sent back word that it was not her money to be spent and that it was not her house to offer, her mother had stopped replying to her letters.

At least Lydia had found a new joy in letters from her oldest 3 sisters. Jane and Mary each would send a letter every few weeks detailing the happenings in London with the Gardiners. Mary especially was gifted with writing letters which allowed Lydia to imagine wonderful scenes involving her sisters and young cousins. They spoke of feeding the ducks in the park and playing with wooden soldiers and dollies on the frequent rainy days. It was comforting to hear that her family was at least happy. Just today she received a letter from Jane saying that Mr. Bingley and she were courting and hoped to marry before the winter once Mr. Bingley could take residence in the estate he hoped to buy.

While she certainly cherished her correspondence with Jane and Mary, Lydia was ever eager to receive a missive from her sister Lizzie.



Since she had confided in Lydia, Lizzie send her youngest sister many details and observations about life as Mrs. Darcy that she could share with few other people. In return, Lydia would share many of her new accomplishments and attempts to be a more worthy young woman. Her second oldest sister had gone to much trouble to ensure a happy and safe life for her and little Thomas, the least Lydia could do was to let Lizzie know that she was not wasting this new chance.

Lydia had taken her vow to spend some part of every day in useful pursuits seriously. She has started to read books of value and Lady Gwyneth has been teaching her rudimentary skill at the pianoforte. But the pursuit Lydia enjoyed the most was drawing.

Nearly every day, either before Thomas woke in the morning or during his mid-day nap, Lydia would come to sit on a large outcropping of rocks at the edge of Lady Gwyneth's property that overlooked the sea and the short pier where the fishermen would bring their catch for the day. Her favorite subject were the boats laden heavy with fish. She had recently deemed one of her drawings good enough to send to her sister. Lizzie had sent back a letter full of praise for the extraordinary likeness of the coast and the fish pier.

Today Lydia was watching the men who worked for the Scarborough fish monger chip away at the last of the sea ice used to preserve fish for travel across the country all the way to London. She sketched then with their large picks, breaking up the, now small, block of ice and fitting the pieces into a large crate. Lydia was always welcome to come closer to the building on the shore near the pier known as the Fish House, but today she preferred the long angle for her drawing that included the contrast between the heat of June and the cold trapped in the ice.

Josephine Carter Fitzwilliam, Geoffrey Fitzwilliam's new wife, was the daughter of the fish monger who controlled all of the fish trade in Scarborough plus most of Yorkshire and Derbyshire. The Carters were an old family which has been catching fish off the coast of Scarborough for over 5 generations. Josephine's grandfather married the daughter of the local thatcher who helped him design a better fishing net. One with a smaller weave but made of strong, lightweight rope that allowed for one fisherman to wield the net and catch more fish each day. The quantity of fish being caught by the Carter fishers grew so much that it was difficult to sell all of the stock before it spoiled, especially in the summer months.

A most ingenious answer had presented itself about 10 years ago. The

current Mr. Carter developed a relationship with a ship captain who went to the extreme north in search of ice to sell in the meat markets of London. The Ice Captain had pulled into Scarborough pier damaged and with a nasty case of Dysentery devastating his men. While the compassionate community of Scarborough had cared for the seamen and fixed the damage to the ice breaker ship, Mr. Carter entertained the captain and learned about how he would go north in search of massive ice blocks to tow down to Liverpool then send on to the London markets.

It had given the old fish monger, with too much fish, a fantastic idea. He convinced the Ice Captain to form a partnership where the seaman would bring huge blocks of ice to Scarborough and the fish monger would then freeze his large catches. This plan saved much of the fish from being salted to keep it fresh for the markets south of Derby. Salted fish was falling out of favor with the elite. French cooks all wanted fresh fish. Mr. Carter believed that if he could freeze the fish shortly after being caught, then package it in ice for the trip to London, he could sell much more fish at a higher price.

First, Mr. Carter bought a piece of property near the shore that was undeveloped and built a warehouse on stilts with a freezing floor in the center. The special floor consisted of large sheets of metal instead of wood which would be kept cold by contact with the large ice blocks from below. A hanging apparatus was built under the building where the ice blocks would be placed. As the ice melted, the ropes would be tightened to keep the ice in contact with the freezing floor. Fish to be taken to the London market was placed on the floor and allowed to freeze overnight. Another large block of ice was placed outside in a cool cave that was on the shore property. Some of this block was shaved off each day in the morning, mixed with sawdust, and used to fill special shipping boxes. Smaller boxes were first dipped in tallow mixed with bee's wax, then filled with the frozen fish. Those boxes would be placed in larger boxes which had just about four inches of extra space on each side. This space was filled with the shaved ice and then also sealed with the tallow wax before being placed on the cart bound for London. By mid-morning, the box would be on its way and the new days catch would be coming into the pier ready to be unloaded and placed on the freezing floor.

Lydia had seen the fishing boats coming in almost every day for about 6 weeks before she caught sight of the ice boats coming into the pier for their November delivery. It was an amazing sight to behold. The ice breaker ships had metal sheets affixed to the bow and very narrow but deep keel in order to navigate the massive floating ice islands.

Three ships pulled into Scarborough hauling 4 huge blocks of floating ice each behind their hulls attached with great long ropes. Nearly every man in the town came to help drag the ice up to the warehouse.

The Ice Captain could only bring ice to Scarborough 3 times a year. It was a long sail to get to the ice hunting waters and dangerous. After November, it was impossible to pass through some of the narrow passages, so the ice hauled into town in mid-November would have to last a long time. This was relatively easy since the winters in Scarborough are really quite cold. Four of the massive blocks were placed on the hanging platform under the building to cool the freezing floor. Another 4 were placed in the cave to be kept all winter for shaving and packing the shipping boxes. The last 4 were placed near the waterline of high tide. These last 4 blocks were allowed to sit in the cold of the Northern England winter days and collect additional girth from the twice daily high tides. By the time one of the blocks under the building would require replacement, the 4 reserve blocks were nearly 20% wider.

The winter ice could easily last until late April or early May, which is exactly when the Ice Captain would return again with the spring haul. A third voyage would be taken immediately after delivering the spring ice, arriving in late August with the fall ice blocks. In years with cold winters or mild summers, the ice would easily last all year round. Only once in the last decade did the fish monger have any gap in time between when the spring ice melted before the fall ice was delivered. Several years Mr. Carter had been required to reduce the amount of fish he could freeze each night but was not forced to shut down freezing.

Another fortuitous relationship with a popular fish seller in London had allowed the Carter Fish Company to quadruple their final sale price of unsalted fish. In less than one generation the Carter family had gone from comfortable working class to elite merchant class with as much money as any of the Bingley's ilk in London. Mr. Carter had sent all of his children to school in Derby and was trying to buy a reasonably sized estate near the Fitzwilliam's Scarborough property. Josephine Carter had been settled with a £15,000 dowry and her younger brother was set to attend Oxford in the next year. Usually, association with the noble Fitzwilliam family would have been a significant stretch for the Carters, but Geoffrey and Josephine had fallen in love years ago when both were quite young. Mr. Carter did not want to risk negative gossip hurting his business if his family was labeled inappropriate social climbers and first refused to allow the match. Lady Gwyneth would not hear one word against the lovely

woman who made her son happy and all but demanded that her nephew, Lord Matlock, come and officially sanction the marriage. After the Earl himself gave his blessings, the wedding date was set.

Lydia had never met someone so funny and sweet. Lizzie was surly funny, but her humour always seemed to hide a bit of acid. Jane was of course sweet, but never allowed herself to speak ill of anyone in order to draw attention to the humor of a situation. Josephine was a wonderful mix of Lydia's two oldest sisters, and the two young women had become fast friends.

With absolutely no judgment, Josephine had helped Lydia manage the uncomfortable symptoms of pregnancy and then provided a strong compassionate shoulder to cry upon in those moments after Thomas came where she felt wholly overwhelmed. They had shared many wonderful moments together. Josephine had also taken on the role of part time nurse to Thomas. She declared one day that Lydia was doing too much and needed rest. The young mother had protested Lady Gwyneth spending any more money on her situation and refused the hiring of a wet nurse and nanny. In the first few weeks, Lydia was attempting to do everything. Every feeding, every nappy change, every nighttime mishap, and it showed on the 16 year-old single mother. Josephine had declared herself as the 10am to 3pm nanny, giving Lydia time to properly dress for the day, eat a morning meal, practice her new pursuits, and perhaps nap for a few hours.

Josephine also insisted that Thomas's noon time meal be changed from Lydia's milk to sweetened cow milk. Though Lydia was unsure if this was a good choice, it honestly made the largest difference on the young mother. She was slight like Lizzie if not slightly taller and the stress of little sleep combined with meeting all of Thomas's hunger needs had taken a toll on her healing body. With one fewer feedings each day as well as a proper bath and meal, Lydia began to regain her strength and heal from the birth.

Another thing the two young women had shared was Josephine's suspicion that after 4 months of marriage she believed she was with child. Though nothing could be confirmed before the quickening, all symptoms pointed to another joyous addition to the family in the late fall.

Family.

Lydia stopped drawing for a moment to think about her Family. For 16 years she had been brought up at Longbourn with a proper mother,

father, and sisters, but something about her new home with Lady Gwyneth, Josephine, Geoffrey, and Malcolm felt much more permanent than Longbourn ever had. She would always love her mother and sisters, and Lydia missed her father with a real ache deep in her breast, but here in this place, Lydia felt like she had found the family that was actually meant for her. The family she would choose.

Over the last 6 months, Lydia had been included by the small family. She had been respected and cherished. Her son, the bastard child of a degenerate who society would have deemed below any notice, was loved beyond measure by her new family.

The younger vicar especially had been everything a man of God devoted to serving his flock should be. Though not quite as handsome as some men Lydia had met in Scarborough, he was steady, sympathetic, and not quick to judge. Malcom Fitzwilliam believed in forgiveness and healing above scorn and derision. His mother's violated innocence and isolation was proof positive that society was too quick to judge. A large wooden plaque hung by the doors to St. Mary's parish, carved in Malcom's own hand, which recited the gospel of Luke Chapter 6 Verse 42: *"How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take the speck out of your eye,' when you yourself fail to see the plank in your own eye?"*

The good vicar of Scarborough made sure that his flock looked hard at their own eyes before searching for specks in their friends'.

He also loves little Thomas.

After his christening several weeks ago, Malcolm took the baby around the formal gardens at the Fitzwilliam estate laid in a small wagon piled with blankets to see the birds and the sunshine. He pointed out all the blooming flowers then sat on a bench to feed the babe his noon bottle. Actions that many fathers did not take the time to perform for their own children. The feeling that Lydia gets when she takes Thomas over to the church for visits with the Vicar or to play in the courtyard, it feels like family.

Does Lydia dare dream?

All winter, Lady Gwyneth and Malcolm included her in their plans. They would go about the country side in the coach showing Lydia the local sights or host small parties for their good friends in order to introduce Lydia to the people of Scarborough. But it was when Lydia asked Malcolm if there was anything she could do to help in the

church that their relationship began to become a personal close friendship. Malcolm admitted to being a boar with a needle and thread and could maybe Lydia help with mending donated used clothing for the poor? Lydia immediately jumped at the possibility of helping Malcolm. She had never made whole garments before, but she was an expert at trimming a bonnet or over making a dress, so she figured that she could easily lean to make and mend clothing.

If drawing was Lydia's labour of learning for Lizzie, sewing became her labour of love for Malcolm. The local seamstress gave Lydia a few lessons about proper stitch density and thread maintenance then showed her how to make a simple men's work shirt. After mastering simple work clothes, Lydia was able to learn how to make a full dress and men's coats. She found quite a talent for making well-constructed and comfortable clothing. The poor box at St. Mary's was continuously overflowing with clothing that looked nearly new once Lydia had finished her work.

At Christmas, Lizzie had sent a beautiful present of fine quality muslin in colors suitable for a widow in mourning, but that would be able to transition post mourning. She sent several yards each of a hunter green light-weight fabric, a deep mauve woolen weave, and a dove grey fabric of a weight appropriate for a beautiful dinner dress. As Lydia's condition progressed, she developed a unique way of tying the stays in the back of the dresses so as to let out more room in the front and even constructed the mauve dress with a full braided tying closure and a pleat down the back able to provide additional comfort in her final months approaching her confinement.

So impressed was the good vicar, with both Lydia's dedication to the church community and her creative mind, he encouraged Lydia to make similar gowns for the poor pregnant women near and around Scarborough. Much of the fabric was donated by the clothing mill nearby (whose owner we have already met) and each masterpiece was made with a specific recipient in mind. When presented with her gown, each expectant mother, some of whom were living in little more than a hovel behind some stable mews, felt every bit as important as a debutant coming to a fitting for her first ever ball gown. Lydia even did much of the dying and ribbon trimming work herself so that the recipients wouldn't have to worry about any needed finishing touches.

The more affluent women from gentil families or the wealthy merchants started desiring Lydia's pregnancy gowns and offered to pay the young widow for her wears. Once again Lydia astounded

Malcolm by asking him if would be alright for her to accept donations to the church in exchange for making dresses for women with the means to pay. He merely stared at her with a blank look for several minutes before finally saying that he believed that donating the money she makes to the Church would be a noble thing, but didn't she want to build up a nest egg for when she decided to take Thomas and lead a more independent life?

Lydia had looked into his ice blue eyes and been as truthful as possible. "No sir, I do not believe there shall every come a time that I shall desire to be away from you and your family. I am sure that I have come to belong here with the Fitzwilliam family."

The look in his eyes told Lydia the she was not alone in her appreciation of his character and steady devotion. Somehow Lydia felt like she was on the brink of something great, but her instincts had failed her before.

She must proceed with caution and consult with Lizzie.

# Chapter 20: Leaving Town

## Chapter Summary

It is time to depart for Pemberley.

## Chapter Notes

This is a short chapter and I'm sorry again for the delayed update. I am finding that as I near the end of the story I am having trouble keeping to the Chapter by Chapter updating. It feels as if I need to completely finish the last few chapters in order to get all the details right. Hopefully it will be worth the wait once it is actually ready. Thanks again for all the encouragement and comments. I have really enjoyed this process.

### ***Matlock House, St. James, London***

#### ***10 June 1813***

Inside the Darcys' spacious stage coach, the tension from an extended silence was almost as suffocating as the mid-June heat. Six young women sat in varying states of unease and amusement while the 4 horses clopped along at barely a walk in the crowded London streets.

It had been decided by the Countess of Matlock that the whole party heading to Pemberley should leave in one caravan that departed Matlock House at 10am sharp. Even though Darcy had protested vehemently that such a departure hour was nonsensical given that it was the fashionable strolling time before morning calls thus the streets would be nearly impassable, his aunt was immovable. This leave time was strategic and chosen exactly *because* of the high volume of traffic which would be encountered along The Mall, past Covent Garden, and up Farringdon Street on their way to Smithfield Market which marks the beginning of the Great North Road. Lady Matlock wanted everyone in London, from the lowliest street beggar to the Prince Regent himself, to see the grandeur of Georgiana Darcy's traveling party.

Truly, the Countess had planned for a fantastical spectacle.

First down the road was the Matlock Carriage, built specially for the Earl and Countess with large suspension springs attaching the coach to the wheel base in order make for a more comfortable ride in the three



days journey between Matlock and London. It was a smaller equipage with only enough room for 4 passengers and often the Earl and Countess rode alone in order to have added storage room for books and other travel entertainments. The outside was painted a brilliant shade of yellow, which stood out well against the grey London buildings, and had the colorful Matlock Crest painted on both doors. Liveried coachmen sat prim in the front bench and 4 enormous black bodied Shire Horses with white hoofs and mains, all sired from the same stallion, were proudly leading the caravan.

Next came the Darcys' stage coach. In a stark contrast to the Matlock Carriage, the coach was enormous. Darcy's father had purchased the body of the coach from the staging post in Derby several years before his death after an accident had broken the front axle and 2 wheels. The industrious Darcy head coachman had used the perfectly intact post coach body and the serviceable under-carriage from one of the Darcy's older traveling carriages to construct a beautiful and sturdy stage coach. It could more than comfortably sit 6 grown men inside with benches on top for 4 more passengers or luggage storage as needed. The front driver's bench could seat 3 servants and an additional 2 coachmen could ride above the luggage rack at the back of the coach. Many a season the elder Mr. Darcy, William Darcy, and Georgiana Darcy had taken just the stage coach to London inviting their 3 personal servants to ride inside with the family and bringing 5 coachmen to alternatively drive the coach and care for the horses. With so many large men adorning the outside of the coach, no highway man had ever even tried to take on the formidable Darcy stage coach.

Following the Darcy stage coach were the fine traveling carriages of Lord Derby, Lord Nottingham, and Lord Bristol, each richly adorned with the coat of arms of its owner's Earldom, and outfitted with liveried servants and 4 well-bred horses.

Next was supposed to be Lady Sefton's bright blue traveling landau, but the great Lady had declined to comply with the Countess's plan of a late morning departure. She insisted that as an old woman she had earned the right to depart when she wanted, thank you very much. Lady Sefton rose with the rooster, as was her wont, and left as soon as the sun had peaked over the great dome of St. Paul's. She informed Lady Matlock that she would meet the party that evening at the Coaching inn at Huntingdon.

Finally, bringing up the rear were the Hurst's and the Bingley's traveling carriages.

With so many carriages, horses, trunks, and coachmen, the Pemberley house party caravan achieved Lady Matlock's goal of turning every head in the whole of the city that was along their route. The grand Countess sat proudly in her plush seat with the shades up and waved to acquaintances as they passed. It was a sight not soon forgotten.

While the Earl and Countess of Matlock were comfortable in their seats, content to let the horses wade through the crowds, not everyone in their party was as happy with the situation.

Back at Matlock house there had been a mild disagreement about who was to ride in which carriage. Assuming that Darcy would accompany his sister, each of the young ladies still vying for his attention tried to insinuate herself into the Darcy stage coach. Lady Grace, Lady Miranda, Lady Fiona, and Caroline Bingley were nearly pushing each other to get close to Georgiana and not so subtly hint at their desire to travel with their *dear friend* and the party's hostess.

Georgiana had actually invited Jane and Mary Bennet to ride in the Darcy stage coach since they were her personal guests and had no transport of their own, but in the end Lady Matlock had ensured such unimportant persons were not seated in the prominent and noticeable position behind the Matlock Carriage. When the time came to load into the carriages, Lady Matlock had loudly commented how lovely it would be if Lady Fiona and Georgiana could get some time to catch up with each other during the journey north. Before either Darcy or Georgiana could open their mouths to indicate the expected arraignment of persons, Lady Fiona had taken Darcy's hand and stepped into the coach. Not to be left out, Lady Grace instantly stepped in behind Lady Fiona. Lady Miranda and Caroline each nearly tripped on their skirts in an attempt to gain seats before the coach was filled without them.

So, with 4 simpering ladies seated inside, there was only room for Georgiana, whom Darcy handed in second to last, and then finally Elizabeth. The collective glare towards Elizabeth and audible groan of the other coach occupants would have been humorous except that Elizabeth was dreading the long day traveling with such harpies and Darcy was left without a seat in his own transport! Thankfully, Bingley stepped up at that moment and offered seats in his well-sprung and recently re-cushioned carriage to Darcy, Jane, and Mary.

Lord Bristol offered the use of his carriage to the Fitzwilliams; Richard, Lady Marianne, and their older brother Henri Fitzwilliam, III the Viscount Huntley; Miss Anne de Bourgh, and Anne's companion

Miss Jenkinson, while he decided to ride alongside the caravan with Bernard Finch, Captain Finch, and Viscount Asbury.

Finally, with everyone settled with some kind of acceptable means of transportation, the caravan had started the arduous journey out of London.

Now, more than 2 hours after setting out from St. James Place, the Pemberley bound caravan finally passed Hampstead Heath and the traffic thinned into a reasonable flock of northbound travelers. The coachmen coax the horses into a nice canter and the passengers inside the Darcy coach each let the relief of being out of the city temper their sour moods.

# Chapter 21: Coming to the Country

## Chapter Summary

The stress of traveling provides much needed reflection and a few revelations to the northbound party-goers.

### *On the Great North Road*

**12 June 1813**

The warm rays of the sun were just beginning to peek through the curtains in the spacious, but sparse, rented room occupied by the Master and Mistress of Pemberley. It was finally the last day of traveling for the large group of party-goers and Darcy expected to make it onto Pemberley's grounds in time for tea that afternoon. The last 2 days had been an extreme trial for the Darcy family, which accounted for the serious risk Darcy and Elizabeth had taken by sharing a bed last night.

The first day of traveling had been very uncomfortable for most of the young unmarried persons. Darcy was seriously displeased with his aunt for arraigning the travelers in such a way as to deprive him of the pleasure of riding in his own coach and his wife's company. He had a mildly pleasant trip riding with Bingley, Jane, Mary, and Bristol but mostly sat staring out of the window with a forlorn look upon his face. Once the group had made it out of the city and onto the Great North Road and the speed of the caravan increased to a tolerable rate, Darcy released a great sigh of relief. Darcy's actions and attitude was generally ignored by his sisters-in-law and best friend, each of whom were well acquainted with his more morose tendencies and also guessed at the true bent of his thoughts, wishing a certain set of fine eyes was amongst them. Unfortunately, the other occupant of the Bingley carriage was neither used to seeing his old friend so downhearted, nor was he privy to the true leaning of Darcy's heart.

*“Darcy my man, what has you so depressed this day? Are you not enjoying the company of these lovely ladies and your university comrades? Surely if you prefer the attention of another young lady, your sister's companion could be made to travel with us once we stop to refresh the horses in a few hours. I have to say I was surprised that Lady Matlock did not object to her being handed into the coach after your sister. I know she would have*

*preferred a more prominent figure sit near the window so as to be seen riding down The Mall."*

Darcy's anger flared instantly. He was just about to demand an apology for speaking so disrespectfully about his beloved Elizabeth, but was saved by Jane's gentle, diplomatic voice.

*"My lord, I am sure my sister considers it her duty to accompany Miss Darcy and provide the female companionship both have come to rely on in such social situations. Miss Darcy is the hostess for this party and the young women now sitting in the Darcy Coach her personal guests and friends. Our Lizzie provides guidance in female conversation and quiet strength while instructing Miss Darcy in her duties as hostess. Besides, Mr. Darcy, I am sure, would rather not listen to all the talk of fashion, gothic novels, and balls that is likely to dominate the conversation of 5 young ladies straight from the London Season."*

*"Yes, thank you Miss Bennett. I dare say you are correct in your assessment of my interest in the general companionship to be had currently in my coach, but I was dismayed with my aunt's interference with the travel arrangements. Before she rudely took control of invitations to my equipage, my sister had provided invitations to both Miss Bennett and Miss Mary to ride with us. I am glad that Bingley stepped up so quickly to aide in the dilemma, but I am mortified that the offer was so abruptly rescinded. At least Lady Matlock knows enough not to question my decision about sending Elizabeth with Georgie for I am sure my sister would have been quite overwhelmed by the presence of so many lively traveling companions without her. My sister is not well at ease in such demanding social situations without Elizabeth's sweet presence, even when she is with me."*

Upon hearing Darcy use such familiar language to address his supposed employee, Goodwin Hervey raised his eyebrows at his stoic and proper friend. He glanced around to the other occupants gauging how the lady's sisters took such a display. Mary noticed his reaction and decided it was time to interject.

*"Yes Mr. Darcy, your sister does seem to respond to ours very well. We are all so glad that our families have become so close since Lizzie taking her position in your household. Thank you again for including myself and my sister Jane in the invitation to your estate for the summer. Lord Bristol, where exactly is your ancestral home?"*

The remainder of the conversation in the Bingley carriage centered on the differences between Pemberley and the Bristol estate.

Unlike Jane's kind representation of the conversation likely to be taking place in the Darcy's coach, when the ladies did begin to speak, it was not about fashion and balls. Shortly after passing Hampstead Heath, Caroline Bingley decided to take her disappointment of being without Darcy's company out on Elizabeth.

*"Miss Eliza, we are very nearly to Meryton, are we not? Have you had occasion to visit your poor, widowed mother since taking your **position** with the Darcys? And what of your cousin who inherited your father's estate? Did he not marry your particular friend, the former Miss Charlotte Lucas? I dare say it is nice to have the option to visit your friend at your former home if you ever have time to take away from your duties. Perhaps once Miss Darcy's marries, or more likely when Mr. Darcy marries, and your services are no longer required, you can spend a few weeks in between situations visiting your family and friends."*

Caroline did nothing to hide the scathing tone in her voice but Elizabeth just smiled through the misguided woman's diatribe.

*"Miss Bingley, I have had two occasions to visit my mother in Meryton and one trip to visit my youngest sister in Scarborough since joining the Darcy's household. Mr. Darcy has been extremely kind to allow me such time with my close family. Neither trip to Hertfordshire allowed for time to visit with my cousin Collins at Longbourn, though I know Mr. Darcy personally paid Mr. and Mrs. Collins a call while we were on the road to Pemberley last fall. Perhaps someday I will visit my childhood home, but I am content to live at Pemberley and Darcy House for now."*

The discourse in Darcy's coach did not improve from here. Even though Georgiana tried desperately to find more congenial topics of conversation, Elizabeth's **position** with the Darcy's keep being emphasized by the other ladies in the transport. Lady Grace and Lady Fiona eventually began disparaging Elizabeth as much as Caroline while Lady Miranda nervously looked between the 4 bantering ladies and Georgiana blanched at each thinly veiled insult hurled at her sister.

When the caravan stopped at about 3pm for tea and to rest the horses, Georgiana begged her brother to be allowed to change carriages. Under the guise of entertaining her other guests for the rest of the day's journey, Georgiana traveled with her Fitzwilliam cousins for the second half of the trip. This left Elizabeth free to also choose another carriage and as the party was again lining up fill the carriages, she followed her sisters and husband to Bingley's carriage. Upon noticing the change in seating for Georgiana and Elizabeth, Lady Matlock once

again tried to interfere with Darcy's plans.

*"Fitzwilliam, how lovely that Miss Elizabeth will be able to spend some time with her sisters and Georgiana is going to enjoy her dear cousins. Now you shall be able to reclaim your position in your own Coach."*

Upon hearing her words, all 4 of the hopeful candidates for Darcy's attention sported extremely hopeful looks upon their visages. Internally, Darcy groaned. It would bring too much attention to his relationship with Elizabeth if he snubbed 3 Earls' daughters and the generously dowered sister of his best friend, but there was no way he was going to get into that coach to be left alone with the vipers. He decided he must make another choice of travel for the afternoon. It was impossible, though, to keep out all traces of irritation out of his reply.

*"Thank you aunt, for finally allowing me a seat in my own coach, but I had decided that I should rather ride with some of the other gentlemen this afternoon. Incitatus is in need of exercise and there are few who can properly handle him due to his height. Bingley, I shall entrust the Miss Bennets to your capable coachmen."*

With a final bow to his wife and a pointed look at Bingley meant to convey his expectation that his friend was to protect that which was most precious in his life, Darcy went to retrieve his horse from the attending stable hands.

That first night at the Huntingdon traveling inn was even worse than the day had been. Lady Matlock had chosen the accommodations for the trip and made arrangements with the inn keepers. The inn that first night was well-kept and clean but small. It had limited rooms, forcing most of the married couples and several of the unmarried sisters, including Jane and Mary Bennett, to share a room for the evening. Lady Matlock had determined that Elizabeth, instead of having the room attached to that of Miss Darcy, should share a room with Anne de Bourgh's companion, Miss Jenkinson, in the servant's wing.

To say that Darcy was furious would be a gross understatement. All day he had been separated from his Elizabeth due to Lady Matlock's heavy handed arranging of his affairs. Now she had made it such that he wasn't even going to be able to see her during the night. If Miss Jenkinson was expecting Elizabeth to share her room, then an absence would surely be noticed and commented upon by his cousin's companion.

It was also not lost on Darcy that Lady Matlock, whether maliciously or simply out of long standing and ingrained prejudice, had treated Elizabeth as if she had no standing in society at all. It would be absolutely unacceptable for an unmarried gentlewoman to share a room with another lady who was not her close relation. Also, no one would bat an eye at three unmarried sisters sharing a room in a coaching inn, and additional cots were certainly available for the evening. No, instead his aunt had singled out Elizabeth as the Bennett sister who had lost all respectability within the gentleman's class due to her taking a position with the Darcys. Her sisters were still treated as the daughters of a landed gentleman and offered the comforts of a generous room and a lady's maid.

The second day was poised to pass similar to the first until Darcy cut off any scheming by making it clear at the very start of the day that he would again be riding his horse instead of riding in any coach. This declaration saw Lady Fiona, Lady Grace, Lady Miranda, and Caroline Bingley wondering towards their own carriages instead of spending another day trying to intimidate the others into realizing that their designs on Darcy were delusional. While Darcy exhausted his body in order to distract himself from his anger, Georgiana, Elizabeth, Jane, Mary, Bingley and Bristol enjoyed pleasant conversation in the comfortable Darcy coach.

On the second evening, Darcy again found that his aunt had reserved a room for Elizabeth and Miss Jenkinson to share in the servant's quarters even though this particular inn was more than twice the size of the previous establishment and such space saving was not necessary. This was the moment that Darcy's physical and mental exhaustion overran his propriety. In a slightly louder voice than was necessary, he informed the inn keeper that his sister wished for her companion to share her rooms that evening and the double servant's room would be unnecessary. After that he requested dinner for himself, his sister, and Miss Elizabeth be taken to the sitting room adjoining their two rooms so that the small family could enjoy some quite respite before beginning the last day's journey.

While the Darcys enjoyed the peace found only within their small party, many of the other travelers were decidedly less at peace. Lady Matlock followed Darcy's example and requested dinner for herself, her husband, and her sons be taken in a private dining room. She was determined to have a serious conversation with the men closest to Darcy concerning his inappropriate behaviour.

*"Henri, this ridiculous preference for his sister's companion has got to stop!"*



*How is he ever to choose an appropriate wife if he keeps insisting on treating that servant as if she were still a gentlewoman. I'm sure that if we weren't heading to Pemberley right now for an exclusive house party, the Earls of Nottingham and Derby would be reconsidering their approval of Darcy as a suitor for their daughters. As the head of this family you shall have to set that boy straight!"*

Lord Henri Fitzwilliam, the Honorable Earl of Matlock, took a moment to consider his wife's passionate speech by slowly sipping his wine. It was his opinion that Fitzwilliam had taken a **particular** liking to the young and beautiful companion. It was not the first time Lord Matlock had considered that Darcy's initial reason for hiring the young lady as Georgiana's companion was to give cover to the actual position she fulfilled in his household. He was also of the opinion that his nephew was in no hurry to marry anyone, especially not any of the ladies currently fighting over his attention. And with such a sweet companion to warm his bed, there would be nothing he could do to convince Fitzwilliam to give up his attentions to Miss Elizabeth.

*"My dear lady, I understand your desire to see our nephew advantageously situated in marriage, but you misrepresent my position within Fitzwilliam's life. Indeed, I am the head of the Fitzwilliam family, but not the Darcy family. Fitzwilliam Darcy, as did his father before him, has always conducted his business outside of my purview. Yes our nephew comes to me for advice when he needs it and he has always headed my concerns when I have designed to bring them to his attention, but I assure you that I will have no ability to demand anything of the Master of Pemberley. In this matter, I am unsure exactly what I shall be able to accomplish by bringing attention to what you consider ill-advised attention to Miss Elizabeth. Additionally, I do not believe that Darcy considers himself a suitor to either Lady Miranda or Lady Fiona, so their fathers cannot withdraw approval for a situation that does not currently exist."*

While his parents continued to argue about his closest relation, Richard silently ate his meal, keeping his thoughts on the situation to himself. Richard had come to similar conclusions as his father with one glaring difference: the good Colonel was convinced that Darcy wanted to marry the enchanting Miss Elizabeth Bennett. His attentions to Lydia Wickham and the inclusion of her other sisters in invitations, both now to Pemberley for the house party and during the season, signaled to Richard the depth of Darcy's resolve to make Elizabeth Bennett the next Mistress of Pemberley. Richard also believed that his cousin would never risk the kind of talk that would come from an early issue or hasty marriage, so doubted that Darcy would take Elizabeth to his bed before their wedding had been sanctioned by the

church. Of course Richard was correct as to Darcy's sentiment regarding bedding his wife, he was just misinformed as to the date of the Darcys' marriage. All of the Fitzwilliam's from Matlock would have been shocked to find out that the two persons at the center of their evening discussion were, at that moment, indulging in a shared bath.

The secret couple decided that food was not really their primary need, but instead they both were craving some private time. After sending away all of the inn staff and making very short excuses to Georgiana, Darcy and Elizabeth lounged together in the warm water letting all the dust and stress of the day wash away.

After a restful night spent in each other's arms, Darcy opened his eyes to see the sun highlighting his wife's dark hair with kisses of auburn. He knew that they should rise; she should leave his bed and go back to his sister; all of the Darcy's should prepare for their two week ordeal where Elizabeth would again inhabit the bedroom connected to Georgiana's room instead of his. Should, should, should... All of the shoulds were pushed aside in favor of a few more stolen minutes in each other arms and tasting the spot just behind his wife's ear that always made her sigh with pleasure.

Just as Elizabeth started to respond to his ministrations, the door to Darcy's room shook with the force of banging from the hallway.

Both Darcy and Elizabeth froze for a second. When the knocking sounded again, this time with a call from the Viscount Finwell, the oldest son of the Earl of Nottingham, Elizabeth buried herself into the covers and Darcy rose to find his robe. He made sure that the bed curtains facing the door were securely closed and no part of his wife was visible before opening the door to the hall.

"Finwell, what in the world is so important before 6am? I was under the impression that we had chosen a departure of 8 for the whole party and breakfast was to be available in an hour." Darcy barely opened the door and did not make any move that could be interpreted as an invitation for the Viscount to enter. Looking behind the man banging on his door, Darcy saw that the Viscount Asbury, heir to the Earl of Derby, and his cousin, the Viscount Huntley, were also standing outside his door, each fully dressed in riding clothes.

"I'm glad you had enough time in company last night to be appraised of the traveling plans. I had thought you abandoned us all before dinner." The irritation in Finwell's expression stemmed less from any

perceived slight on the part of his longtime friend than from the hours of his sister's complaining and his mother's lecturing. Last night he had been subjected to all manner of vile accusations against his friend and demands that as the next Earl of Nottingham, he must speak to the wayward Master of Pemberley. Before he was allowed to rest, he had been conscripted into doing their bidding today and thus was up and dressed with nary a drop of coffee to even be smelled coming from the kitchen. Asbury hadn't had to endure quite the ordeal of his friend, but Lady Derby was less than pleased with the amount of attention Darcy had so far paid to her daughter and Lady Miranda admitted that she would very much welcome additional encouragement for her affections. Huntley had promised his father that he would warn Darcy about Lady Matlock's mood and suspicions. He also planned to caution Darcy not to provide too much ammunition during the party with which to assassinate Miss Elizabeth's reputation and perhaps his own in the process.

"Truly Darcy, we have decided to ride ahead of the caravan and take a bit of sport with our mounts. Plodding along at the speed of the carriages for 2 days has us all wary. Come with us old man and we shall reach Pemberley in time to take a few turns about your training track that circles the stables before we must once again be presentable for tea. We shall also call for Richard and my brothers. Perhaps even Bristol, but he seems to have taken a preference for riding inside the carriages these last few day. Oh, and I suppose Bingley would enjoy some sport too. Come, let us leave the ladies and old men to the cushions and escape to manly pursuits."

Darcy certainly enjoyed riding his horse and would have welcomed a few turns about the track with his friends, but fear for the safety of his wife and sisters was foremost in his mind. This section of road was empty and rarely saw travelers, which means that highwaymen could often be found lurking in the woods just waiting for a large expensive carriage to roll by. "I don't know if that is a good idea. We are out in the middle of the country and still nearly 7 hours from Pemberley. Leaving the traveling company so devoid of men for protection could invite trouble."

Finwell rolled his eyes at this, couldn't Darcy ever just let go of his overwhelming sense of responsibility and be suggestible for once?!? "That is ridiculous, you have 5 coachmen atop the Darcy Coach alone. Each other coach has at least 2, and often 3 coachmen. The number of male servants outnumber the ladies nearly 2 to one. Add to that your uncle, my father, Lord Derby, Mr. Hurst, though I don't know how useful he would be in a crisis, and possibly Bristol and/or Bingley. The

young ladies will not find themselves without proper protection.”

“I would never forgive myself if anything happened to my family just so I could engage in some much needed sport. No, I believe I shall stay with the caravan.”

Finwell was getting frustrated. He needed to separate his friend from the group in order to have the conversation he had promised his mother and sister. It would be altogether too embarrassing to attempt the words in the hearing of the coaches, and if the answer he thought might be coming was offered, he certainly did not want the women in his family to overhear. “Darcy! I insist that you come with us and that we find some separation from the group. Now get dressed, I am going to demand coffee from the kitchen before this ridiculous affair begins.” Finwell abruptly turned and stormed off towards the stairwell leaving Darcy bewildered by his mood.

Asbury only shook his head and continued on with the request turned demand. “Darcy, Finwell is correct, the ladies will be well protected by our servants and fathers. We should not waste this opportunity to be in company with each other since it will be expected that we spend time with the young *eligible* ladies during the course of the house party. Please say you will join us.”

Perceiving something in his friend’s phrasing, though not comprehending exactly what unsaid message he was trying to convey, Darcy decided on a compromise. “Perhaps once we get to the outskirts of Leicester and the road has more regular traffic we can separate from the group. If we gallop all the way back to Pemberley from that point we could arrive nearly 2 hours in advance of the carriages. This should be plenty of time to engage in some sport and my 3 year old horses should be ready for racing. We have had good Stable classes these last 5 years, this year’s racing class was being broken just as we left Pemberley for the season last spring.”

Knowing that this was the best they were going to get from his immovable cousin, Huntley moved in to accept the plan. “William, I believe that to be a grand compromise, plus that shall leave us all with time to enjoy some much needed breakfast before taking off. We shall leave you now to your toilette and inform the other riders of the day’s plan.”

Darcy nodded and turned to close the door. When he heard the Viscounts’ footfalls moving away from his door, he locked it firmly and went back to his beloved wife. Elizabeth had been hiding under

the covers throughout the entire conversation, trying to move as little as possible and even breathing only as much as was necessary for fear one of their early morning visitors would hear her. Once Darcy climbed back under the covers, she released her death grip on the sheets, snuggled into his offered embrace and hid her face in his neck. Neither spoke for a few long moments.

“Dearest, are you all right? I am sure none of the Viscounts had any idea you were here as they couldn’t even see the bed from their viewing angle. Please, Elizabeth, look at me, let me know you are ok.” Darcy gently placed his finger under Elizabeth’s chin in order to lift her face to his. He had been prepared for embarrassment due to the situation and even perhaps anger at him for allowing such a risky even to take place, but he was not prepared for tears.

“William, we have been so blind to how others see us. My reputation will surely be ruined and all our sisters shall come down with me. How could we let this happen?”

“What are you talking about? What do you mean about how others see us? I am sure no one suspects anything untoward is happening between us. As I said, none of my friends could have possibly seen you here and you have been in the company of either my sister or yours during both days of traveling so far. Why do you fear for your reputation?”

“Oh my sweet love, do you not see why your male friends, each with either an unmarried sister vying for your attention, or, as in the case of your cousin, a matchmaking mother hell bent on seeing you advantageously married before the harvest begins, have come to separate you from the traveling party? Did you not catch Lord Asbury’s emphasis on spending time with *eligible young ladies* or how it was clear that Lord Finwell desires to have a private conversation with you before we arrive home, likely regarding his sister’s ambition to become the Mistress of Pemberley? I fear you shall be subjected to questions regarding your intentions towards the unmarried ladies in our party and perhaps even thinly veiled warnings about engaging in inappropriate activities with your sister’s companion.”

This revelation was most unwelcome. Darcy replayed the last two days in his head, including the most recent conversation with the 3 Viscounts. He began to see his aunt’s maneuvering in a much different light. Going back even further through the events of the season, he could see that many of the times he had been offended at the way Elizabeth was slighted by Lady Matlock, either by calling particular

attention to her **position** or how her mother and sisters were scattered all across England following the death of her father and even once by suggesting she leave the company since Georgiana was obviously not in need of her services, followed immediately behind some overt act of attention paid to her by him.

The last event had been one of the most recent evenings they had spent in Town, dining at Matlock House with a large party not too dissimilar to the party now traveling to Pemberley. Dinner had been a relatively pleasant affair since Darcy had been placed across from Georgiana and Elizabeth, as was proper for a social companion, was seated to her left within speaking distance. Lady Fiona had been seated to his right with the ever silent Dowager Marchioness of Queensberry to his left. While Lady Fiona was certainly focused on having Darcy and his estate, she was at least a pleasant conversationalist and polite enough not to dominate any of her dinner partners. It was after dinner that Darcy had earned the wrath of all of the ladies of the Finch family.

The evening's entertainment was a musical exhibition by the ladies and a few gentlemen who were so inclined. Lady Matlock had drawn up a schedule of performers so that each may know when his or her time was coming. It went much in the order of rank. First came any of the married ladies who wished to participate, then the titled unmarried ladies, then the sisters and daughters of wealthy gentlemen, and finally the 2 young women with connections to trade, one being Caroline Bingley and the other being the well dowered daughter of an extremely wealthy London Grocer who had been included in the dinner invitation at the urging of Lord Matlock due to the Earl's interest in a possible investment in the business. The men were sprinkled throughout to give the party some variety. Those who were not included in the invitation to exhibit were the companions to Lady Sefton, Anne de Bourgh, and Georgiana Darcy, even though Darcy knew all three to be lovely pianists with significantly more natural talent than several of the "accomplished" ladies in the room.

During the entire event, except for Georgiana's performance, Darcy had sat with Bingley and Bristol near the back of the room discussing a large variety of topics. None of these men had any interest in the musical talents of the exhibiting ladies seeing as each was secretly in love with one of the Bennett sisters. Lady Matlock remarked twice how inconvenient a seat the men were occupying and surely her footman, James, could arrange for a location in the room which afforded a better view of the pianoforte. Both times Darcy answered his aunt that they were perfectly content in their repose and did not

require a change to the furniture placement. During Lady Fiona's rendition of the rather scandalous Italian aria, *Voi che sapete che cosa è amor*, Lady Matlock actually came over to the threesome and tried to bring Darcy back to her seat near the front of the room.

Following the end of the scheduled exhibitions, Lady Sefton asked Elizabeth if she would indulge an old woman and play the lovely Scottish lullaby she had performed a few days earlier at Darcy House. Elizabeth obliged the great lady and took her seat at the pianoforte straight away. Much of the rest of the company became involved in partaking of the coffee and sweet cakes that had been set out upon the buffet, allowing Elizabeth's sweet tune to become pleasant background music, but Darcy was entranced. He always loved listening to his wife play, and this song was a particular favorite of his. She sang softly to the melody flowing from her fingers. Part of the song she sang in English and part in Gaelic. Darcy was always amazed at how she could make the northern language, so full of harsh consonants and guttural noises, sound as lovely as any French love song. Without much thought, he drifted from his friends in the direction of the pianoforte until he was standing next to the instrument with one hand on the lid and both eyes trained on Elizabeth.

With his attention so fully engaged with the vision of his wife, Darcy missed the veritable smoke rising from his aunt's ears and Lady Fiona's actual stomping foot. He also missed the satisfied smile upon Lady Sefton's face while she observed the young couple at the piano.

At the conclusion of her song, Lady Matlock swept over to the pianoforte and nearly caught Elizabeth's fingers in her swift motion to close the fallboard. Some nonsense about not wanting to wear out the strings of her fine instrument with so much excessive playing was offered as the excuse to abruptly end Elizabeth's playing. Then came the suggestion that Miss Elizabeth looked rather pale so must be exhausted from a long day of *performing her duties* and it would be no trouble at all to have a room in the servants hall made available if she wished to rest for a short time while Fitzwilliam and Georgiana enjoyed the company of their friends.

Darcy was appalled at such treatment of a guest, even a supposedly paid companion, and promptly announced that they had all had a long, *tiresome* day. He had offered his arm to Elizabeth, collected Georgiana from the conversation she was having with Bernard Finch, and called for their carriage immediately.

Now, in the warm embrace of his wife with the morning sun full in

the sky and two whole weeks of company ready to invade their sanctuary, Darcy began to fully appreciate the precarious position in which they found themselves. Oh, if only he had not allowed his aunt to bully him into this ridiculous house party!! When he turned his attention back to Elizabeth, all the anger flew away with the sight of her tears still streaming down her lovely face.

“Do not fret dearest, I will not allow your reputation to suffer. I promised you last September that I would protect our family and I shall keep that promise. Today, once the caravan enters the road to Leicester, I will lead the young bucks in a race to Pemberley and submit myself to whatever conversation they wish to have. I will deny any involvement with you beyond gratitude for your success with Georgie and protectiveness for a woman in my house. There are those amongst who know the truth, or half-truth, and others I believe suspect something of the truth, but I will represent to Finwell, Asbury, and Huntley that our relationship is simply one of employer and employee. I will not lie if the conversation turns to my intentions regarding their sisters and cousins, but I will not hint at the true direction of my affections.

“Furthermore, I promise to behave for the next two weeks. I know you already plan on inhabiting your old room attached to Georgie’s instead of the Mistress’s chambers and I will not make a habit of coming to lie with you there at night. I shall have to abstain from sleeping with you in my arms for only 15 nights. My behaviour during the day shall also be above reproach. I shall be gracious to our guests, even the young ladies who try my patience so. And I shall attempt to stop paying you particular attention while in full company. We have only these two weeks to bear and then we shall become like hermits, accepting no invitations and issuing the same amount.

“Hopefully Jane and Bingley will come to a final understanding soon, as well as Mary and Bristol if I haven’t read that situation improperly. I am also hopeful that Bernard may approach me as to an understanding with Georgiana. Even if he is not in a position to marry for another year or so, a formal courtship during the little season this winter, followed by a 4 month engagement would bring them close to a year before their marriage. With Jane, Mary, and Georgiana so well situated, we could let the truth of our marriage be known without causing any harm to your final sister, Catherine.

“I promise you my dearest, loveliest Elizabeth, all of the sacrifices you have made by pretending to be that which you are not and all of your enormous patience for the rude comments delivered by the ladies of



the *ton* shall not be in vain.”

# Notice from Author

## Chapter Summary

An apology and an update on posting status.

Hello everyone. First, thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting. I've had a wonderful time working on this story. As I said a few posts ago, I'm having trouble with the ending in the sense that I don't feel like I can post chapter-by-chapter until I substantially finish all of the story lines and get the ending right. I've also taken the advise to get a Beta reader to help me finish. Please stay with me, I promise I'm working on the finish and plan to complete this as soon as possible.

Thanks,  
StormSmith

# Chapter 22: With the Beauty of the Roses a Few Thorns Must Come

## Chapter Summary

Elizabeth muses on the first half of the house party at Pemberley while enjoying the summer sun and the South Rose Garden.

### *Pemberley, Derbyshire*

#### *17 June 1813, Early Morning*

*“A Rose-bud by my early walk, / Adown a corn-enclosed bawk, / Sae gently bent its thorny stalk, / All on a dewy morning. / Ere twice the shades o' dawn are fled, / In a' its crimson glory spread, / And drooping rich the dewy head, / It scents the early morning.*

*Within the bush her covert nest / A little linnet fondly prest; / The dew sat chilly on her breast, / Sae early in the morning. / She soon shall see her tender brood, / The pride, the pleasure o' the wood, / Among the fresh green leaves bedew'd, / Awake the early morning.*

*So thou, dear bird, young Jeany fair, / On trembling string or vocal air, / Shall sweetly pay the tender care / That tents thy early morning. / So thou, sweet Rose-bud, young and gay, / Shalt beauteous blaze upon the day, / And bless the parent's evening ray / That watch'd thy early morning.”*

*A Rose-Bud By My Early Walk by Robert Burns 1787.*

Early morning rays of the sun showered Elizabeth in a brilliant warmth. Though the massive Donisthorp longcase clock chimed only eight times, the manor house had been busy with activity for nearly 3 hours. The servants had begun making preparations for the 5<sup>th</sup> full day of the Darcys' house party just as the dawn broke above the woods surrounding Pemberley's formal gardens. With the rising of the sun, so too did the Master and Mistress rise from their cold, lonely beds. Neither slept well without the other and found that attempting sleep after the sun invaded their bed-chambers was a lost battle. Their first morning waking at Pemberley in such familiar surroundings but unaccustomed to the feeling of lonesomeness and longing, they had

met on the stairs to the breakfast parlor quite by accident. Each very pleased that they were able to spend a quiet breakfast together, at their sunny table, with only their own servants, who were very well aware of their married state, around to judge their behaviour.

Or so they thought.

Apparently the personal servants to Lady Matlock, Lady Nottingham, Lady Derby, Lady Fiona, Lady Grace, and Caroline Bingley all managed to observe at least some portion of Elizabeth and Darcy's morning repast. After that first breakfast, Darcy had left to ride out with his steward and check on a few of the tenant farms while Elizabeth had taken the opportunity to meet with Mrs. Reynolds in the housekeeper's office near the entrance to the servant's wing to go over all the plans for the next 14 days. So, before any Earl, Viscount, or other male guest had even begun to stir, and with the primary parties engaged with estate business and therefore insensible to the storm brewing inside their guest wing, all of the matchmaking mommas and the scheming ladies were being regaled with some version, mostly exaggerated, of the Darcys' early morning movements.

It was purely blind luck that Marianne Marshall, Elizabeth's abigail, had been stocking Lady Matlock's bath with fresh linens at the exact moment the Countess's own abigail had burst in with the morning gossip. As personal servant to the Mistress, Marianne was considered on equal footing with Mrs. Reynolds and above such tasks as moving the laundry about. But with so many guests all arrived at the same time, it had been difficult for the upstairs maids to fulfil all of the requests for specific comforts. This morning it was a good thing Marianne did not consider herself too high to help the household generally as there was no one better suited to deliver this message to Elizabeth than herself.

Marianne stayed just long enough to get the full story of what Lady Matlock's abigail was relaying before racing down the servants' staircase to find Mrs. Reynolds. Along her way to Mrs. Reynolds's office, she passed through the servants' dining room where Lilian and Connor Grayson were both having breakfast. She paused long enough to beg that they both leave immediately to the upper floors and keep their ears open for any gossip amongst the visiting servants and gentry. With only one glance between the personal servants to the three Darcys, all were off in a dash to gather what information they could.

Marianne declared it a miracle, though Elizabeth was not so sure that

God's protection truly extended to keeping lies and secrets from Darcy's family and other Peers of the realm, that she arrived less than 2 minutes before Lady Matlock so as to give Elizabeth some warning.

The enraged Countess had donned her dressing gown and little else before storming out of her rooms and demanding to speak with her nephew. If Darcy didn't have the decency to keep his illicit affair under regulation with a house full of decent guests, than she was going to set him straight even if she had to turn him over her knee like a child! When the footman informed her that the Master had left early to inspect the fields, she turned her anger towards Elizabeth. The poor footman, who was no more than 12 years of age and really only stationed at the top of the grand stairs during the nighttime hours in order to learn the position before taking his full place in the household, was at a total loss and quite unable to find his tongue in the face of an enraged Countess.

Lilian appeared around a corner just in time to save the situation and looking quit put together for a woman who had just run the entire length of the guest wing at the sound of Lady Matlock's yells. She informed the Countess that Miss Elizabeth was meeting with Mrs. Reynolds in the housekeeper's office before Miss Darcy woke for the day, as was her practice while in residence at Pemberley.

Not waiting for directions to the housekeeper's office, Lady Matlock veritably flew down the stairs and rounded into the servant's corridor. She opened the first door on her right with all the confidence of a woman who had daily run 2 households and overseen the operation of 3 others for more than 30 years.

The shouting and degrading words spoken by Darcy's aunt that morning were truly too distressing to be relayed here. She accused Elizabeth of all manner of vile behaviour and declared that she was going to be the ruin of both Darcy and Georgiana. Lady Matlock's diatribe hit too close to many of Elizabeth's own fears for her family's reputation. While the secret Mistress of Pemberley would not be bullied into admitting wrongdoing in her own home, she did start to shed silent tears at the thought that they would be unsuccessful at protecting all the Bennetts, Darcys, Fitzwilliams, and Gardiners.

Thankfully, before she demanded an answer to her accusations, Lady Matlock was cut short by the bellowing entrance of her husband. Connor had run straight to his brother Grayson, Charles Bingley's valet, to try and get a sense of the gossip amongst the men. When they heard the commotion caused by Lady Matlock yelling, the Grayson

brothers decided it was time to bring in another ally, one with more clout than a servant or the Master's young friend. They needed a respected man of action. They needed the Colonel.

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam may currently lead a privileged life of training troops in London and Newcastle, but he did not always have his choice of assignment. Having bought his commission as a Captain after finishing university, Richard Fitzwilliam was almost immediately sent to Spain and Portugal to defend the Iberian Peninsula. Within 6 months he had earned his first field commission and another by the end of his first year on the continent. For nearly 3 years the Fitzwilliams heard little from their son and saw he even less. His battalion was given only one brief holiday on English soil in Southampton for 12 days between campaigns and it was a wonder that anyone's family was able to get to the port city in time to actually lay eyes on the men.

Though being woken in the dead of night by gun fire and cannons was a thing of his past, the good Colonel would forever be the kind of man that woke swiftly at the barest of noises and was fully dressed with saber at arms in nary a moment.

Upon the first twist of the doorknob to his customary bedchamber at Pemberley, Richard was up and calling out to whoever dared enter his rooms so early. He dressed while Grayson and Connor explained what likely was taking place downstairs and crossed the hall to his father's chambers before their tale was complete.

Thankfully Matlock had spoken with Richard the night before regarding the outcome of the young men's separation from the traveling party and the conversation that necessarily took place between Darcy and the interested Viscounts. Richard relayed that Darcy vehemently denied anything illicit regarding his relationship with Miss Elizabeth, merely expressing his protectiveness and gratitude to the woman who was able to give Georgiana such ease and confidence in society. The Earl had scoffed at that, so Richard had decided to share his private knowledge of Darcy's love for Miss Elizabeth and his belief that, once Georgiana was well settled, Darcy planned to marry her.

Not much else was said between father and son while each finished his evening brandy. Before retiring for the night, the Earl decided that he had seen enough misery amongst his family members due mostly to the misguided desire to pay off debts with the money and connections that can come out of marriages for the younger generation. His own

older sister had been sacrificed to Sir Lewis de Bourgh to pay his father's losses from a failed horse breeding investment. Lady Gwyneth had been neglected due to the circumstance of her birth and sold to the first man to look in her direction. While he and Josephine were tolerably happy, Lord Matlock personally knew of only one couple, Lady Anne and George Darcy, who had been truly in love during their marriage. If William wanted to be happy with the sweet tempered, intelligent daughter of a gentleman, he would support the boy when the time came. He just never imagined that time would come before breakfast next.

Standing in the housekeeper's office, having heard several of the vilest things he has ever heard uttered by a lady come from his wife's mouth and directed at the lady who was most likely the next Mistress of this estate, Henri Fitzwilliam decided that he had to put an end to his wife's machinations.

*"Josephine you will desist abusing the young lady this instant! She has done nothing except rise at an early hour to attend to her duties before the rest of the guests begin demanding her attention. This is NOT your house and I told you the other night that Fitzwilliam Darcy is not subject to the authority of Matlock. I have allowed you too much latitude in your scheming concerning our nephew's marital state. Well, that ends today. If William is inclined to marry a woman you have deemed a good match, then bless them both. But if he is not so inclined to make his choice from among your favorites, then when he does make HIS choice, you are hereby ordered to wish him joy and graciously accept the lady into our family. I do not care if she were to have been born a street urchin or sold flowers at Covent Garden before meeting William, the next Mrs. Darcy shall be given all the advantage of our connections and our support. Until that day, you are not to make one mention of his current state, you are to desist throwing young women into his path, and you are NEVER to abuse a member of his household again. Now apologize to Miss Elizabeth and come back upstairs to right your appearance before we are expected to breakfast."*

Since Lord Matlock had taken Lady Matlock away from the confrontation in Mrs. Reynolds's office, no one had said another word to Elizabeth regarding her relationship with Darcy. And no one dared even think such reproachful thoughts in Darcy's presence. Lord Matlock had spoken with the other men before Darcy had arrived home and informed them that he would support his nephew and the members of the Darcy household against the vicious rumors regarding his relationship with Miss Elizabeth. He insisted that the only real evidence showed that his young, motherless niece had taken a particular liking to her witty compassionate companion and Darcy was

only guilty of allowing a sisterly, familial affection for the young woman.

It was a good thing his uncle had righted the situation in his absence, because Darcy was not temperate in his response when informed of the abuse Elizabeth had endured at the hand of his, usually, more reasonable aunt. If he had been actually present to witness such abuse first hand, there is no telling what his response would have been.

But, just because no one was speaking of the incident directly to the Darcys, Bennets, or Fitzwilliam men, it does not follow that they were not speaking of it to each other during private moments with those of a like mind. On several occasions, Elizabeth, Georgiana, or one of the Bennet sisters had walked into a room where whispered conversations ended abruptly. Additionally, none of the titled young Ladies would so much as look at Elizabeth, let alone engage her in conversation. On the third morning, Elizabeth had come to breakfast to find Lady Matlock, Lady Nottingham, and Lady Fiona as the only occupants at the table. She had bobbed a curtsy to each lady and wished them all good morning. Not one of them even looked at her.

Such overt incivility was not tolerated by Darcy, Lord Matlock, and Richard, so Elizabeth fared better when in full company. But the morning hours, when no formal events were planned and most of the guests attended to their own pursuits, were barely tolerable for Elizabeth inside her own home.

So here she sat in the morning sun, alone in her rose garden, having risen with the crow, taken breakfast on a tray in her rooms, and then escaped out of a servants' door at the side of the house. Elizabeth had brought one of her father's most beloved books, a set of poems by Robert Burns, and was enjoying the sweet scent of the roses while running her fingers over every scrawled margin note written by her beloved father.

In just under 2 months he will have been gone for a year.

It felt as if, simultaneously, she had just seen him yesterday and more than a lifetime ago. When reading his wisdom in the pages of a book, which smelled faintly of his favorite tobacco, it seemed like she would turn around to find him laughing with his eyes at something ridiculous her mother had said. But on cold, lonely nights, without either her sister Jane or her husband to calm her thoughts, Elizabeth knew that every new day was another where she would not see him again.



Just then, a flock of birds was driven from a nearby copse of trees, startling Elizabeth out of her melancholy. She shook her head and laughed at her own silliness. Such morose thoughts could only come from her present, less than pleasant, situation. While it genuinely distressed her to know that William's extended family may never fully accept her position as Mrs. Darcy, she was sure that she would never truly have any reason to repine. William loved her completely. Georgiana was the most wonderful sister and she knew that they would be happy together once all of the interferences left them. She was also taking extraordinary pleasure in watching Jane and Mary enjoy the company, particularly the company of a certain Earl from the south and the gentlemanly son of a mill owner from Yorkshire. As long as Elizabeth's sisters were safe from the scorn of society and William loved her without reserve, she cared not what they would say of her.

Truly, not everything about her current situation was dreadful. Without the expectation of entertaining the vapid young women, Elizabeth had been more pleasantly engaged in stimulating conversation with the male members of the party. She had taken a particular joy in expressing many opinions not truly her own, especially related to politics, when conversing with one or the other of the Earls. Even her staid husband had openly chuckled in full company at her antics the prior evening. Elizabeth had been caught out when Lord Matlock heard her discussing the industrialization of the commons, and playing the part of the Tory opposite to the staunch Whig ideals of Lord Nottingham. Earlier that very day, she had discussed the exact same topic with him, only she had him convinced that she truly believed in Whig populist progressivism! When he heard his own words parroted by Elizabeth at his old friend and political rival he was astonished. Even more so when the old bag actually listened to the young woman and conceded a point he himself had been trying to make for years! Lord Matlock nearly fell out of his chair with laughter and declared that all of the parliamentary debates were obviously useless. Instead, they should all take turns speaking with witty, pretty, and intelligent women because obviously that was where common ground could be reached.

Additionally, Elizabeth had taken a liking to the grand Lady Sefton. While Caroline Bingley often complained that her Great-Aunt by marriage was prickly and snobbish, Elizabeth found her to be a delightful conversationalist and quick witted. In fact, Elizabeth believed that the distinguished Lady held a similar disposition to herself, which may explain Caroline's dislike of both. A few mornings, after breakfast but before the day's scheduled activities began, Lady

Sefton had gravitated towards the music room to listen to Georgiana practice her pianoforte and converse with Elizabeth.

Yes, overall this party was not nearly as unpleasant as she had feared it would be. Elizabeth never expected the matchmaking mammas or the scheming ladies to be particularly kind to her, nor did she truly want for the lack of their friendship. She was perhaps a bit overtired of late, but she was finding rest difficult without William's comforting arms to surround her. The event was nearly half over and before anyone could blink an eye, most of the guests would be leaving for their own estates and Elizabeth would once again take her rightful place as Mistress of Pemberley. She and William had discussed that they would no longer keep their marriage a secret from her sister Mary, Charles, or Richard. Additionally, if any of the suitors vying for Georgiana and Mary's attention decided to declare themselves, William had decided to speak frankly of his intentions towards Elizabeth and perhaps even reveal the truth if he believed it would be received with calm and understanding. With a few more allies to their marriage, hopefully it would be easier to transition into society and quell the worst of the rumors.

Elizabeth lifted her face up to the morning sun and smiled. Yes, while every moment of her life was not free from all worry, in this one she felt quite content.

# Chapter 23: A Most Pleasing View

## Chapter Summary

Darcy's thoughts on the first few days back at Pemberley.

## Chapter Notes

This chapter and the last had originally been one chapter, so here's another update.

### *Pemberley, Derbyshire*

#### *17 June 1813, Early Morning*

Darcy sat at his huge ebony desk, behind the locked door to his study, staring blankly at the piles of correspondence and business letters that needed his attention. The last 5 days and nights had been a serious trial on the Master of Pemberley. Sleeping in the massive bed in the master's chambers had become nearly impossible without his wife. Each night he lay awake staring at the ceiling wishing he dared traverse the 5 closed doors between himself and Elizabeth. It would be so simple. The main rooms of the family wing were all connected by adjoining doors. There was even a small closet at the end of the hall with doors to the bedchambers on either side so that one could walk all the way around the perimeter of the wing without stepping into the hall where you would be visible to anyone who happened to be passing by. From his own bedchamber, Darcy need only walk through (1) the door to the Master and Mistress's shared sitting room, (2) the door to the Mistress's chambers, (3) the door the nursery, (4) the door to the wet nurse/governess's room, and (5) the door into the bedchamber holding his enchanting wife. No one would know. Only the Darcys' personal servants and select upstairs maids came into the family wing. His movements would not be detectable from the outside hall. Each of the family wing bedchambers was locked from the inside, and Connor would surely know where to find him in the event he was needed. But Elizabeth would be furious if his inability to stay away for 15 sleeps lead to further scandal.

His insomnia had become so advanced that he had actually not gone to bed last night, instead staying on the chaise lounge in his study. While he had managed a few hours of sleep on the slightly awkward lounging chair, Darcy was now suffering from a crick in his neck. If he did not get some quality sleep soon, he was going to become the most

intolerable host that ever graced Pemberley's halls.

And Darcy's foul mood was only adding fuel to the reason his days were also neigh unbearable.

His beautiful, strong, loyal Elizabeth had been infamously abused by Lady Matlock. Darcy had finally browbeaten his uncle into revealing what was said and instantly understood why the Earl had been reluctant to repeat his wife's words. Darcy nearly had everyone thrown out of his house that instant! He had never wanted to host this ridiculous party anyway and to find that the simple act of rising before the rest of the house to attend estate business was reason enough to spread gossip was too much. Richard and Lord Matlock were able to salvage the situation and convince Darcy not to expel his guests on their first morning, but his interactions with his guests, particularly the tiresome women bent on making his life intolerable, became even more monosyllabic than ever before. If Elizabeth had found him uncivil in the company of her Meryton neighbors, she barely even recognized the stone faced and angry man who often showed up for dinner.

After leading the young men in a race to Pemberley and indulging in some sport, Darcy had dutifully listened to his cousin and friends regarding the wishes of their mothers and sisters. Finwell had been very blunt in repeating the accusations of Lady Nottingham and Lady Fiona. Asbury merely stated his sister's long standing admiration for Darcy while his cousin, Huntley, noted that his mother was becoming impatient with the unmarried state of all three of the Fitzwilliam male cousins. Darcy was as contrite as he could muster but defended himself to his friends. He also definitively declared that he had no inclination to marry any of the young ladies in their party. While none of the Viscounts had been happy with the news, they were not particularly surprised. After hearing of the scheming and gossip circulating through the ladies of their party, it became difficult to keep his promise to Elizabeth to be a gracious host.

Darcy could barely stand to look at the women who were treating Elizabeth with such incivility, let alone be a pleasant conversationalist. But, for the sake of his duty as host and his family's ease of mind, Darcy had been trying. At each meal he sat with a new grouping of guests and spoke on whatever topics they choose to explore. During afternoon outings, he made sure to vary which lady he offered his arm, often squiring more than one at a time in order to give no one the impression that he favored anyone in particular. And he made sure not to engage Elizabeth in full company without at least

Georgiana or one of her sisters involved in the conversation.

Even though they spent every meal in company together and much of each day, Darcy had never felt so bereft of Elizabeth's company. More than anything, he desired to just sit with his wife for an hour and speak of simple nothings, or read the paper while she attended to letters over tea, or doze together in a warm bath scented with her lavender water. *No. Best not muse on that last one just now.*

Each day so far had consisted of a regular pattern. Breakfast was informal, allowing everyone to rise and eat at their own leisure. The morning hours before luncheon were also generally unscheduled so that their guests could attend to their own business and pursuits, but there was always entertainment available should someone be looking for it. Elizabeth and Georgiana had ensured that all of the Darcys' lawn games, such as shuttlecocks and lawn bowls, had been located and repaired if needed. There were also hunting excursions for the men organized by Pemberley's game master.

Luncheon was always a formal affair with a planned special event or location. The first afternoon, the staff had organized an elaborate picnic by the lake on the front lawns. Another afternoon, Elizabeth had arranged for a French pastry chef from Derby to come and demonstrate how to make some of his fine chocolates and puffy desserts. In a few days, the entire party was supposed to leave shortly after breakfast to visit the newly restored Tutbury Castle which was hosting a reenactment jousting tournament.

Finally, each day ended with a fabulous dinner planned by Elizabeth and Cook then some elaborate entertainment. So far there had been a theatre troupe, a traveling string quartet, and last night a lady very skilled in making flower scented oils had helped the ladies to bottle their favorite scents while a cigar maker had showed the men the newest products from the Americas. In 10 days, on the last official evening of the party, there was to be a grand ball with all of the notable families within 50 miles having received invitations.

Thankfully tonight's entertainment was a chess tournament with card tables for anyone who choose not to participate, so Darcy's physical fatigue would not hamper his ability to enjoy watching Elizabeth's superior skill and strategy.

All in all, Elizabeth and Georgiana had planned a fabulous event with many amusing entertainments for everyone to appreciate. Truthfully, Darcy had never so much enjoyed himself at a house party such as this

nor delighted so in the offered amusements. He really should be in a much better frame of mind. But no matter how interesting he found the offered diversions, he still had to endure the pointed attentions of the 4 marriage minded ladies and he missed the affection of his wife acutely.

Just as the sun flooded his second floor study, streaming through the woods surrounding Pemberley's grounds, Darcy rose from his desk and went to look out the window of his study. The sight that greeted him was breathtaking.

Elizabeth was dressed in one of her simple muslin gowns from before their marriage, reading what looked to be an older leather bound book (probably one of her father's collection), and seated on the cold earth amongst the pink and white roses of his mother's rose garden. As he watched her, a flock of birds suddenly took flight from near the edge of the woods and startled both from their consuming thoughts. Darcy chuckled lightly to himself. What was it his father had said about watching his mother in the rose garden from this very window?

*He wanted to be able to look out the window and see the most beautiful creatures in all of god's creation enjoying the sunshine together.*

Yes, that was a very apt description of the scene before him. Truly, there was no more beautiful sight than his glorious wife sitting amongst the full blooms of summer with her face turned to the sky in silent supplication.

Deciding that he had wallowed in his study long enough, Darcy opened the secret door behind the bookcase that lead to a servant's stairwell and the master's chambers. After a hot bath and a change of clothes, he was determined to join his wife for breakfast. Hopefully she was still in the rose garden when he returned from his toilette so that he had an excuse to step into the morning sun with the smell of fresh roses surrounding them and beckon her into the dining parlor.

# Chapter 24: The Blooming of Steady Love

## Chapter Summary

A look into the romantic musings of several of the Darcys' house guests.

### *Pemberley, Derbyshire*

#### *17 June 1813, The Breakfast Hour*

For all the attention being paid to the Master of Pemberley's presumed upcoming nuptials in the past 5 days, and the ridiculous posturing to participate as the bride, very little attention so far had been directed at the young men and ladies who actually had marriage on their minds.

Charles and Jane had been enjoying the relative freedom of courting openly with the blessing of her family under the guardianship of Darcy, who was admittedly not the best chaperone in this instance. Before her introduction to the Earl of Bristol, Mary had been a faithful companion for her sister and her beau. But more often lately, Jane and Charles would leave a room and be gone for more than a quarter hour before Mary even noticed.

This morning the two were walking arm-in-arm along the bright path around the lake without any chaperone at all. Both Jane and Mary had been coming down the main stairwell towards the breakfast parlor when Charles emerged from his chambers near the mouth of the second floor guest wing. He offered to escort both ladies to the breakfast table, but as soon as Lord Bristol appeared behind them, the Earl took Mary's arm and neither looked back. This distraction provided Charles the perfect opportunity to invite Jane outside for a private stroll before dining.

Charles had been looking for an opportunity to tell Jane about the estate Darcy found for him. At just under 30 miles to the north of Pemberley along well maintained roads, it would be an easy distance from her favorite sister. Charles had no doubt Darcy would marry Miss Elizabeth as soon as he signed Miss Darcy's marriage contract, so proximity to Pemberley was a key factor in choosing a home for himself and his angel. Holdworth Hall is a modest estate with only 4 tenancies, but the house was reportedly in very fine shape and about the size of Netherfield. Charles really didn't need the money from

farming since he still made nearly £3,000 each year from the wool mill and cloth manufacturer in Yorkshire and an additional £2,000 from interest on his investments, but he wanted to provide Jane with a lifestyle to which she was accustomed. The estate was near the hamlet of Holdworth, right on the edge of the Peak District and less than 2 hours from the city of Sheffield.

Charles and Darcy planned to meet with the estate's owner the week following the house party and negotiate a purchase price if the property was in as good shape as they had been told. Charles wanted to bring Jane and her sisters with him to determine whether she would have any pleasure in living there.

As soon as may be arranged, Charles was determined to make Jane his wife. He had the special license in his trunk-safe just waiting for the vicar's signature. He had also taken to carrying his mother's emerald ring, one of the only frivolities that his father had ever purchased with all of the money that was legally his but controlled by his cruel father. Charles kept the small velvet box in his pocket to make sure that he never missed the right moment to ask for her hand. Charles had even gone so far as to ask Darcy whether he would allow a wedding at Pemberley following the house party, as long as the lady didn't object and her relations from London could make it in time for the ceremony. Darcy had greatly surprised him by agreeing enthusiastically to host Charles's wedding to Jane Bennett and even supplying the date!

It seems that the Gardiners, as well as Mrs. Lydia Wickham with baby Thomas and Darcy's Scarborough relations, were scheduled to arrive at Pemberley the last week of July and stay for several days during each party's summer holiday tour of the Peak District. If Jane agreed, it would be simple to plan a wedding in the 5 weeks following the departure of the house party guests and extend invitations to Mrs. Bennett, Miss Catherine, Mr. and Mrs. Phillips, and whoever of Bingley's family was to attend the festivities. It gave Charles great pleasure to be able to bring all 6 Bennett women together again for the first time since leaving Longbourn last August.

Just as they reached the western most edge of the lake and turned back towards the manor house, a glorious sunrise crested the Pemberley woods and created a glittering display upon the surface of the water. Charles turned to comment on the beauty of the day to Jane and was rendered mute by the even greater beauty of his angel bathed in the morning sun. Her golden hair was glowing as if truly made of gold and her pale skin shimmered with the healthy flush from



their exercise. Off in the distance, a flock of birds cast fluttering shadows across the lake and solidified Charles's resolve. Heaven was here right in front of him.

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Goodwin Hervey and Mary Bennett, after parting from Jane and Bingley, had barely noticed the older couple's sudden departure. Each morning since coming to Pemberley, both had come to the breakfast table early. This was a perfectly normal routine for the studious young lady but terribly difficult for the young Earl. Goodwin had forever been a late riser. During his university days he preferred to stay awake late in to the night hours to complete his studies and never attend a lecture before luncheon. After university, he inherited the Bristol Earldom before being able to take orders, so Goodwin never took the responsibility of running a parish church or leading prayer services at dawn. Add to that the fact that the very competent steward of Bristol, who had been hired by Goodwin's Grandfather a few years before his death and continued to serve both his father and now him, never came looking for the Earl before 10am and it is not hard to imagine that town hours were much more to Goodwin's liking than the country hours kept by his lady love. This rising with the sun and spending the morning hours in productive contemplation of the day ahead was not an easy habit for Goodwin to adopt.

What was easy for Goodwin was realizing that Mary Bennett desired to have read at least one of Fordyce's sermons before breaking her fast and that she never arrived at the table much later than 8am. Given the relative lateness of the hours kept by the rest of the house, it was also easy for Goodwin to realize that if he made it to the table at the same time as Miss Mary, he would be able to spend a very pleasant hour or so speaking with her on a variety of topics in near solitude and perfectly within the bounds of propriety.

After breakfast, they also often spent time together taking a turn about the formal gardens or visiting the music room for Miss Mary's practice. Goodwin realized that this sweet lady was not overly proficient with the instrument, not like his sister or many of the other ladies of the *ton*, but she actually took personal enjoyment in playing. It was more than a chore to be mastered in order to impress in the marriage market.

He also knew that she was nearly 100% self-taught. Certainly none of the Bennett sisters had the advantage of tutors or masters for their education, so any talents the sisters managed to master were

constructed of their own persistence and dedication. In a way he had never before contemplated, this fact actually endeared him all the more to her less than impeccable playing. What was it to him if her fingering was a little heavy or if she consistently fumbled the trills? There were hundreds of masterful players gracing the music halls of London every night where one could listen to perfection. Here, with just close friends and family, Goodwin loved the sweet music Miss Mary played for no purpose than to bring herself joy and entertain the guests.

Yes, Goodwin mused, he could easily spend his life listening to her music fill the halls of Bristol.

And, if she agreed to be his wife, he vowed to offer her any opportunity to play and learn as she may desire. He could already tell that her playing with Miss Darcy had improved her skill, and though he did not feel that time with a music master was necessary for her transition into the Countess of Bristol, he imagined that she may enjoy such lessons. He would also have to look into finding a new instrument for both the manor at Bristol and their London house. Perhaps as a wedding present for his Countess. The ones currently in residence were of adequate quality, but not nearly worthy of someone who truly loved to play. Goodwin considered asking Darcy where he obtained the instrument in Pemberley's music room. It was certainly of the highest quality and very lovely to listen to.

This particular morning, Goodwin was sitting across from Miss Mary at the breakfast table enjoying a discussion on whether the *Authorized Version* of the King James Anglican Bible or the more modern Oxford standard text edited by Benjamin Blayney to omit the books of the Apocrypha should be supported by the Bishop's Council of the Church. Suddenly, Goodwin's attention was diverted by the morning sun coming into the room and casting angelic haloes upon Miss Mary's lovely dark hair. She seemed to glow and highlights of blond strands closer in color to Miss Jane Bennett's hair began to stand out. It looked as if God himself was declaring support for Goodwin's plan to speak to Darcy soon concerning his intentions toward the third Bennett sister.

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While her brother, sisters, and friends enjoyed the early morning sun, Georgiana was hiding in the music room practicing at the beautiful pianoforte in her music room that William had bought for her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Georgie had risen early, eaten within her chambers, and

come directly to the music room to play away her melancholy. The last week had been both a pleasure and a trial for the debutant. She was very much enjoying all of the entertainments Lizzie had planned for the party and loved spending time with her cousins. But the one person she truly wanted to spend time with seemed to be purposefully avoiding her.

During the Season, Bernard Finch had spent nearly every dinner party and glittering London ball engaging her both intellectually and emotionally. Since their first conversation at her debut ball at Matlock House, Georgiana had been fascinated with the young solicitor. He spoke so eloquently about art and music that Georgiana often found herself wondering how so much time had passed without her knowledge. When Bernard spoke of his work with the Parliament, she was memorized by his passion. That he was using his education and position in society to help the less fortunate made her tender heart sing. Truly, Georgiana had eyes only for Mr. Bernard Finch.

But ever since their arrival at Pemberley, Bernard has been distant and uneasy. She had dared to hope that, perhaps, here, amongst friends and family, he would be more relaxed than when dancing in full view of London Society and that they may come to an understanding. She knew he was not yet in a position to marry, but she was still young and between a formal courtship followed by a period of engagement their wedding could be as far off as next spring. If they were openly courting or engaged, she would at least have the privilege of exchanging letters with him after his return to his duties in London.

Sadly, instead of moving towards an understanding, he had been distinctly avoiding her. Georgiana worried that someone had told him that the third son of an Earl with only the income of a solicitor was not worthy of Pemberley's heiress, and god help him if that person was William. She would set her hypocritical, domineering, overbearing, ridiculous, officious, and any other unflattering adjective one could conjure, brother straight. Or, more accurately, she would have Lizzie set him straight.

He had found paradise with Lizzie, the humble daughter of a country gentleman who had no dowry and little formal education. Bernard was far and away a more appropriate choice, born into the upper set, educated at the finest school in England, and with a valuable living plus a house in town. How could anyone object? Didn't Georgiana deserve a marriage filled with just as much love? As soon as this party was over and they could get back to normal life at Pemberley, Georgiana was resolved to speak to Lizzie. She would know what to

say to William.

Little did Georgiana know that her usually overprotective brother was just as frustrated (almost) with Bernard's retreat. William had very much hoped that he could have all three of his sisters currently under his charge well settled by the end of this nearly unbearable house party. He had even entertained some musings about using the grand ball next week to announce all 3 betrothals and introduce Elizabeth to all of the Derbyshire gentry as his Mrs. Darcy. While he had positive knowledge that Charles planned to propose to Jane before the ball, and it seemed that Goodwin and Mary were rapidly coming to an understanding, Bernard had not said one word to either Darcy about his intentions.

Truthfully, Bernard Finch was terrified.

Growing up the third son of the Earl of Nottingham, he had certainly lived much of his life in comfort and luxury, but it had always seemed transient. His older brothers never let him forget that he was unlikely to ever inherit and would have to make his own way in the world. Any stipend the estate could provide for him would not support a family and he had never been particularly close to the Viscount, so planning to live at the family estate was out of the question. His father had paid his way through school and supported him in his early days at the solicitor's firm, but since purchasing his own London townhome nearly two years ago, he had only received a token allowance. True, much of his Season entertainments were funded by his family and as a bachelor he was not expected to entertain, but he was still expected to at least dress the part and silk shirts were terribly expensive. Knowing the cost of only enough silk to cover his thin upper torso, he did not even want to imagine the price of one of the fashionable dresses that ladies were expected to wear, sporting at least one lawyer of silk and another of taffeta plus lace trim and matching gloves. And the average lady of the *ton* purchased more than 20 such dresses every year!

If Bernard was honest and pragmatic about his situation, it really was not all that dire. A successful London solicitor with personal accounts for members of the gentry could easily earn an income over £1,000 per year. His house in town did not need to support tenant farms or maintain the roads traversing his property, so, in terms of available money, this income was approximately equal to a moderately well positioned country gentleman. Plus, his mother's will set aside a significant portion of her settlement for him. But £1,000 per year would not purchase them the lifestyle of the London *ton* and he would not see any of his maternal inheritance until after her death, which he

hoped was a very long time from the present. Bernard was proud of his profession, but it certainly would not support the lifestyle Georgiana and William Darcy enjoyed.

Logically he knew Georgiana did not care about the difference between his annual income and William's. Logically he also knew that Georgiana had a large dowry and would be able to purchase her own personal items and perhaps support several of the additional staff which would be required if he were to marry. He was fairly certain, because he worked at the firm which handled the Darcy personal accounts where the men enjoyed gossip as much as any scheming lady of the *ton*, that there were some restrictions on the principal amount and that at least some portion was set up as an annuity, but this really mattered very little. Even if the whole sum was an annuity, the annual interest on £30,000 could easily exceed £700, nearly doubling his annual income.

His head also told him that William Darcy was a generous man who had very little close family left and absolutely doted on his sweet baby sister. William would forever purchase Georgiana whatever gifts she desired, would probably host them both and any children with which they would be blessed at Pemberley each summer for extended periods, and even supply them with an annual allowance, if need be, to keep Georgiana in the life to which she was accustomed. He would likely even pay for their sons to attend university and if William never married, Georgiana's eldest son would almost certainly be named as the heir to Pemberley.

All of this would be perfectly normal for a couple in their situation, even expected amongst the upper set. Many of his friends who were younger sons had just such an arraignment with their wife's family. The only daughter of a wealthy family who enjoyed a close relationship to her oldest brother was a highly prized commodity with the younger sons. Often, in just such a situation, it was more likely that the husband would become integrated into the wife's family than the traditional arraignment. Knowing William so well and having seen his good friend during the grief of losing his mother and his father, Bernard surmised that his potential brother-in-law would actually be happy about adding a brother, especially when the alternative is losing his sister.

But no matter how many times his head told him that marrying Georgiana Darcy was the most logical decision he could ever make, both from a financial and emotional perspective, his heart was holding him back. He loved her so completely and would never forgive himself

if she lost the opportunity to marry a great man and take her rightful position as the Mistress of a Grand House. With her noble lineage, beauty, accomplishments, and dowry, Georgiana could easily become a Countess or even a Duchess. Arriving at Pemberley after so long a time living alone in his London townhouse brought Bernard out of the fantasy world he had built during the Season. It was obvious, from the elegance of Pemberley's newly furnished guest wing to the extravagant sophistication of each formal dinner, that Georgiana Darcy was being raised to assume her place among the Nobility.

How could he ever ask her to give up her rightful position in society just because he was foolish enough to fall in love with her kind heart and passionate intelligence?

Signing, Bernard shifted his position in the high-backed, dark grey chair near the fireplace in the grand Pemberley library. It was a uniquely uncomfortable chair, positioned in a dim location far away from any of the glorious, massive windows, and so particularly disadvantageous for actually reading anything without a candle. Elizabeth had originally thought the chair was beautiful, with its dark heather cording and delicately embroidered floral pattern across the arched headrest, and wanted it to occupy a more prominent position in the room. After only fifteen minutes of stubbornly attempting to find a comfortable position, she called for a footman to return the beautiful, but wholly unacceptable for actual sitting in, chair back to its relative exile by the fireplace.

The only thing this chair was actually good for was its unobstructed view of Georgina's pianoforte in the music room across the hall.

As such a view was the only thing Bernard Finch actually considered important at this moment, here he sat, mildly uncomfortable and in a melancholy mood as he mused upon his future while listening to the haunting, yet beautiful, music drifting down Pemberley's halls.

# Chapter 25: Second Chances

## Chapter Summary

Checking in with the Scarborough Fitzwilliams as they begin their summer adventures.

## Chapter Notes

I have had a particularly busy Summer and took the advise of some of my readers and engaged a Beta to help finish this story. She's been wonderfully helpful and I've got a lot of work that I want to do on what's already been posted. I promise to finish the story, then go back and fix up everything before marking this complete. Thanks for sticking with me.

### *Fitzwilliam House, Scarborough, Yorkshire*

#### *17 June 1813, Mid-Morning*

Lydia thanked the young new footman, George she believed was his name, when he took her valise to place inside the coach. Thomas was securely swaddled in a sweet blue knit blanket one of the elderly widows from the St. Mary's congregation had made for him and sleeping happily in Lydia's arms. Taking one last look around the nursery, Lydia nodded to herself, content that she had packed enough nappies to make it to their first stop with a wash room. As she descended the stairs, Lydia spotted Malcolm near the front door, watching the trunks being taken down to the waiting luggage cart. As soon as he glanced up towards her and Thomas, Malcolm was moving to help mother and baby down the last few steps.

"Lydia, let me help you with Thomas. We are nearly ready to load ourselves into the traveling coach, and while I'm sure there is no place more peaceful to sleep than in mother's arms, it will probably be easier on you both if we make him comfortable inside the basket before we depart."

Lydia smiled sweetly up at Malcolm. This particular smile held none of the coquettishness that the Lydia Bennet of one year ago would have displayed. Mrs. Lydia Wickham, for better or for worse, had completely given up those traits and her endless pursuit of men. As a widow and mother, Lydia was now content to spend her days as companion to Lady Gwyneth and helping those less fortunate than

herself through St. Mary's Church.

Of course Lydia would forever love looking through whatever fashion magazines she could find, acquiring new brightly colored ribbons, and dancing at the assembly hall full of her friends and neighbors, so there was no fear of the youngest of the Bennet sisters turning completely missish. She just had learned to contain her lively personality in a way similar to how she had often seen her sister Lizzie behave. This new woman was more in line with what society expected from a gently bred young woman but still with the inclination to laugh at the world.

It was freeing.

When Lydia arrived in Scarborough she was a shadow of her former self. Her mother's betrayal and the revelation of her silliness still stung, but if it had been merely Fanny Bennet's famous nerves, Lydia likely would not have made such a complete change. Her mother's actions had been the catalyst, but it was the reactions from all of the other people in her life, some she had known since her infancy, which really opened Lydia's eyes to just how bad a thing she had really done.

Lydia still spoke little about those mere 7 days between when Meryton's doctor, Mr. Jones, confirmed her condition but before Lizzie came to her rescue with Mr. Darcy and the Colonel. They had not been pleasant days. Maria Luca had been forbidden to even look at Lydia, a declaration Lady Lucas made at an indiscreet volume inside the butchers shop. Mr. Collins had graduated from mildly chastising her and her family in semi-public company for the whole situation to making a point of calling on her at her Uncle Phillip's house during calling hours with the sole purpose of banning her from weekly services at the Longbourn chapel while she remained in such a dreadful state. Her ridiculous cousin even seemed to hint that if she were to somehow find herself less than fully alive (by such statement she took him to mean dead because there really are not variations to being alive, one either was or was not), her sacrifice could potentially provide the means of her sisters' return to respectability.

What was worse, he had said all of these things in front of her family and Aunt Phillips's callers in the fashion usually reserved for those same weekly services that she was no longer to attend.

The public verbal abuse by her nearest friends and relations was only the beginning of Lydia's humiliation. None of the ladies of quality would acknowledge Lydia in public. Some had even gone so far as to greet her mother and sister Kitty by name yet not even look at Lydia.



While invitations were scarce for the newly widowed and disinherited Bennet women, they had enough close friends that in the weeks since Mr. Bennet's death the women had shared several appropriately somber meals with little to no formal entertainments as appropriate for women in full mourning. But even that minimal socializing had vanished for Lydia in hardly the blink of an eye.

Within an hour after Mr. Jones had left her Uncle's house, a note had arrived from her Aunt Phillips's particular friend scheduled to take dinner with the family that evening. The note asked, sparing no ink for delicate words, whether the "strawed up little tart" would be joining the proper company for dinner, and if so, they would have to decline the invitation. Lydia's first reaction had been to say something unkind about this dinner guest. The flippant remark fell into a strained silence in the Phillips's front room. When not even Kitty, who had forever parroted Lydia's opinions instead of supplying her own, took her part, Lydia dashed out of the room in quick tears, stomped up the stairs, and slammed the door to the bedroom she shared with her traitors, former favorite sister.

Lydia had expected her mother to plead her case with Uncle Phillips then appear at her door with a warm cup of milk, a small glass of sherry, and a plate of chocolate biscuits. This had always been their way when Mr. Bennet had tried to be strict with Lydia before. But her mother never came. About three quarters of an hour before the dinner bell, Kitty came into their shared room to change into her dinner dress. Lydia pretended to be sleeping, but watched Kitty out of the corner of her eyes. The older sister never even spared a glance towards the younger, except for just before she slipped out the door and that look was to make sure Lydia was still sleeping while Kitty reached into the ribbons drawer and "borrowed" Lydia's favorite green silk hair ribbon.

Mary had stepped into the room just before dinner with a tray. In true Mary Bennet fashion, she had quoted some Fordyce sermon on providing nourishment to those who needed it regardless of whether their sins were great or small. After hours of brooding alone in her room without a kind word from anyone, Lydia was inclined to sincerely thank her somber sister. But then Mary had mentioned how the babe in her womb had no sin but the original and it was Lydia's job to provide for his or her needs. Lydia's anger had flared again at having her condition discussed and her own person disregarded. Soon enough though, Lydia's indignation, along with the former confidence and boisterousness that had always dominated her personality, would be destroyed.

In a mere 7 days, Lydia had been turned out of every merchant's establishment in Meryton and given the cut direct by five women she did not even know. The day before Lizzie and the Darcys arrived in Meryton, and on the occasion of her expulsion from her favorite shop, the haberdashery, Lydia had been handed her most humbling insult.

The haberdasher's 15 year old son, Benjamin, had followed her out of the shop. Lydia and the boy are of the same age and had always been friendly given Lydia's tendency to pass much time looking through each roll of ribbons. So Lydia had greeted Ben with all the warmth of their shared childhood and a little bit of her own need to have a pleasant exchange with an old friend. Instead, the young man had brazenly asked Lydia if she would accompany him back to his chambers for an intimate encounter. He even offered to compensate Lydia with a length of the newest silk ribbon from his father's shop. Lydia was so stunned at the request that she merely stared at Ben for a few moments. The offer was reiterated with a few added comments about how she could no longer be compromised by such an arrangement and as she was already with child, no additional negative consequences could come about. And really, as Ben so thoughtfully pointed out, Lydia would need to consider what she would do to support herself and a babe in the future. The life of a woman of pleasure could be very profitable.

After nearly a sennight of abuse from everyone she had ever known, this offer was the end of Lydia Bennet.

As she turned away from the only person to even speak to her in days, Lydia actually considered his offer. She was certainly educated in the act (at least minimally), thanks to Wickham, and she was ill suited for any manual labor. Lydia had no hope or desire for a respectable family to hire her as a governess or companion. And if the haberdasher's son would rather take her as a prostitute than even pretend he wanted a wife, she finally began to understand the severity of her situation. It was these thoughts which consumed her sleepless night then drove her early into her the solitude of Uncle Phillips's office. There Lizzie encountered a subdued and broken Lydia.

Mr. Darcy's efforts to reclaim Lydia's respectability had provided her a method of escape from the community which no longer accepted her, but alone had done nothing to undo the damage of those 7 days. Lydia was happy to live the lie that was her life in order to give Jane, Lizzie, Mary, and Kitty a chance at their own happiness, but in her heart she maintained a separation between the lie and the real Lydia.

She began to live the life of the widowed Mrs. Lydia Wickham for everyone else but not for herself. She improved her mind for Lizzie. She was a pleasant, if somewhat distant, dinner conversationalist for Lady Gwyneth. She dedicated most of her energy towards being a loving mother for Thomas. And she used her time to help St. Mary's for Malcolm.

During her annual trip to the confessional for the Easter sacrifice, Lydia spoke of her hope that she may find strength from god to continue in this life as long as necessary to secure her family. She also told Malcolm that, though she understood she would never be truly worthy of recognition by polite society, one day she hoped to be worthy of the kindnesses shown to her by Lady Gwyneth and Mr. Darcy. At these words, Malcolm had lifted the screen and looked right at Lydia.

*"My dear Mrs. Wickham, you are more than worthy to receive every kindness bestowed upon your person. Despite the hardships in your past or the cruel and unchristian way some in society have treated you, your life is not devoid of value. I have a question I wish for you to seriously consider: What did you believe was to happen when you began a relationship with Mr. Wickham? When you left Brighton in his company, what were YOUR intentions? Your life is not so much a lie, but a historical revision of sorts. Had you been in charge of the direction of your relationship with Mr. Wickham, you would have been married shortly after leaving together. Those who know you here have always seen you as a lovely young lady and know only of the life you would have freely chosen for yourself. It is true that we must all live with the consequences of our actions, but you have faced those consequences with the poise and grace of a true gentlewoman. Please my friend, free yourself of these destructive thoughts."*

Since that Easter confession, Lydia had begun to release herself from her self-imposed prison. She no longer feared speaking with new acquaintances, imagining that they will have somehow heard of her prior indiscretions or will be able to see through the lies surrounding her life. Lydia instead allowed new acquaintances to simply observe her humor and wit without expectations based on her prior bad behaviour.

Another interesting phenomena has taken place since Easter, Lydia has begun to enjoy socializing again. One reason for Lydia's prior ridiculous and outlandish behaviour was due to her natural desire for attention. As the youngest of 5 beautiful and accomplished sisters, she found it impossible to compete with Jane and Lizzie for attention without flirting outrageously. But without the constant pressure to

marry the most eligible man in the room, Lydia has allowed herself to alter her expectations of social entertainments and employ all the comportment lessons her oldest sister tried to impart upon her. Here in Scarborough, Lydia is sought out for her lively company by both women and men. Intellectually, Lydia tells herself that she shouldn't fall back into the pattern of chasing attention or constantly demanding to be the most popular person in the room, but allowing such things to happen naturally feels wonderful.

Though her heart holds onto hope that a good man (specifically a good man of the cloth with sky blue eyes and the presence of an earthly father) may someday see her as a worthy wife, if that day never comes, she will make herself content.

Coming back to the present, Lydia stated when she realized Malcolm was directly in front of her with the baby's traveling basket laden with blankets. He held out his arms for Thomas in order to situate the young boy for travel.

"Thank you Malcolm. You are correct that, while Thomas could sleep the day away in my arms, my arms shall not have the strength to hold him for an extended period in the swaying coach."

Once the babe was securely tucked into his traveling basket and placed on the floor beside his mother, the rest of the traveling party made themselves comfortable then set off. The Fitzwilliams were taking an extended summer holiday that would weave through the lakes, the peaks, and end up at the door to Pemberley for a lovely visit of one month complete.

When Lady Gwyneth had first spoken of the trip, Lydia did not expect to be invited and was sad to think of such a long time without her new family. Instead of dwelling in the large home alone with only Thomas for company, Lydia had gathered her courage to ask Lady Gwyneth if the Colonel would be coming through the area soon and might be able to escort her and Thomas to Pemberley for a visit. The Lady laughed and informed Lydia that they were spending the tail of their holiday at Pemberley, so would be able to personally transport mother and son to her family, *after* a splendid tour of some of the loveliest natural sights in all of England. Nothing more was said of Lydia and Thomas's inclusion in the traveling party as Lady Gwyneth would not hear one word about the expense or inconvenience of traveling with an infant. The great Lady only replied with the same response she had always given to such protestations from Lydia; "*Family is more than Blood.*"

As the coach pulled away from the spacious house by the sea which had become more of a home in barely 9 months than Longbourn had ever truly been, Lydia felt once again how fortunate she was to have been given this new chance at life.

Lydia was keenly anticipating the many entertainments that had been planned for the coming 6 weeks in the multitude of locations they would be visiting as they made the trip, but the planned sojourn at Pemberley was by far what she yearned for the most. The Bennet sisters had not been all together since shortly after their father's burial. In her youthful musings, Lydia had often thought it would be much better to be without all of the noise and competition for attention that her older sisters created. But since being separated from her family, Lydia realized how much she loved each of her sisters and their unique personalities. She even missed her mother on certain days.

From Lizzie's latest letter, it was expected that Jane and Mary would be passing the late summer and early fall with the Darcys. Only Kitty was not expected during her visit, though there was some vague suggestion of inviting their mother, final sister, and the Phillippses for a visit in early August.

Everyone was excited to have Lydia and baby Thomas come for such an extended visit since only Lizzie had seen Lydia since her departure for Scarborough. Even Mr. Darcy had sent her a simple note expressing his desire to see her and his nephew again. In it, he has asked after the babe's particular needs so that the Pemberley nursery could be well stocked before their arrival. Lizzie had written in her letter that, while the Mistress was normally in charge of such planning, the Master of Pemberley was so fascinated with infant requirements and so excited to have their young nephew in the house, that she had not had the heart to point out it was slightly inappropriate for Mr. Darcy to make such an inquiry of Lydia.

Both Lizzie and Mr. Darcy's letters had also hinted that a possible joyous event worthy of celebration could be taking place concurrent with the Fitzwilliams' summer visit. Lydia hoped this event was the marriage of Jane and Mr. Bingley. She knew that the two were courting with the approval of their Uncle Gardiner and that the Bingleys had accompanied the Darcys to Pemberley for the summer House Party. Lizzie had also mentioned that Mr. Darcy had found an estate for Mr. Bingley to consider in his quest to become part of the landed gentry which was conveniently close to Pemberley.

On a much more unexpected note, Lydia had also inferred significant meaning behind the frequent mentions of a certain young Earl from Kent County in her sister Mary's letters during the last few months. While Mary was never one to put sentimental drivel into writing, the novelty of her most conservative sister mentioning any man not of their close relation in her letters was enough to raise Lydia's interest. Lizzie had confirmed that Lord Bristol and his sister were in the House Party and there were some hopes for a future acquaintance with the family, but as the Earl had not approached either their Uncle or Mr. Darcy as of yet, there was nothing of substance to fuel the gossips.

Breathing deeply of the cool morning air rushing past the coach's open window, Lydia considered her own hopes for the future. As an acknowledged widow, Lydia was free to direct her own life. Whatever plans she made for herself and Thomas did not need the approval of any guardian. But, as a young woman of just 17, and with a disastrous history for making her own major life decisions, Lydia wanted the guidance of her elder sisters and the approval of her Uncles before embarking on any new entanglements. She also considered speaking with Mr. Darcy about her hopes for happiness since they involved his relations. Lydia would never want to insult her generous brother-in-law by taking advantage of his kindness and tarnishing his family name.

Even though she knew that Lady Gwyneth would never forbid Malcolm from marrying her and that Malcolm also cared not about her past indiscretions, there was more at stake than just Lydia's reputation tarnishing the name of a remote branch of the Fitzwilliam family. Lizzie had made a huge sacrifice in pretending to take a position for the sake of all their sisters. If Georgiana's words were to be taken at face value, the second Bennet sister had also endured severe humiliation and prejudice from the overly self-important members of the *ton* in order to keep Lydia's situation from effecting Jane, Mary, Kitty, and Georgiana. Lydia had done as Lizzie has asked last fall and put on a brave face when traveling to parts unknown to live with strange persons, but it was Lizzie who had suffered. In less than one meal, Lydia was put at ease, brought into the bosom of the Fitzwilliam family, and presented to Scarborough society as a respectable young widow. There was hardly any bravery necessary. But it was Lizzie who had endured being constantly ignored, slighted, and dismissed by those in society who should have been paying her court as the Mistress of Pemberley. Lydia was determined not to once again provide her most intelligent sister with heartache or scandal. If Mr. Darcy felt that a possible relationship with Malcolm would reflect badly on any Bennets, Darcys, Fitzwilliams, Bingleys, Bristols,

Gardiners, Phillipses, or combination thereof, Lydia would abandon such hopes without delay.

Besides, she already had Thomas and respectability enough to enjoy Scarborough society at Lady Gwyneth's dinner table. She had already been given a second chance at life, what more could she possibly expect.

# Chapter 26: New Beginnings

## Chapter Summary

Checking in with a few of the Darcys' friends and family.

## Chapter Notes

And here is another chapter focused on some of our other friends. After this we shall return to the events of the house party and the lives of Elizabeth and William.

### *Pemberley, Derbyshire*

#### *17 June 1813, Luncheon on the Terrace*

Anne de Bourgh was having a wonderful time at Pemberley. The young heiress could not remember the last time she had enjoyed a party this much. Although such comparisons were not completely fair considering that in all of her adult life she had only been to a handful of social events, each hosted by her mother. Needless to say, this was the first party Anne had ever been to where enjoying herself was even a remote possibility.

Not all of Anne's life had been lacking enjoyment. The young miss always enjoyed visits from her cousins, some more than others to be sure, and Lady Catherine usually allowed for a short trip to London during the little season for holiday events with the Matlocks and those de Bourghs who still acknowledged her mother out of respect for the wealth of Rosings. As a child, Anne had spent many summer holidays at either Matlock or Pemberley playing in the nursery with her Fitzwilliam cousins, often while either Lady Anne or Lady Matlock were hosting just such a house party as she was now attending. But upon the onset of her fragile health, which came in the wake of a very worrisome influenza in her 14<sup>th</sup> year that left her lungs weak, Lady Catherine had all but refused to allow Anne out into society.

Truthfully, she was totally taken off guard by her mother's acquiescence to allow Anne to accept Georgiana's invitation. Anne suspected it had more to do with the fact that Lord and Lady Matlock had been present in the Matlock house drawing room with Cousin Richard when the ornate invitation was delivered straight to Anne personally and less to do with an actual change of heart regarding Anne's social calendar. No matter the reason, Anne was glad for the



invitation, her mother's approval (if given grudgingly), and for the kindly interference of the Matlock House staff.

Most of the post addressed to the rightful Mistress of Rosings was first read in full and scrutinized by her overbearing mother. If there was an invitation or some correspondence Lady Catherine did not want Anne to see, it promptly went into the fireplace of her mother's study. About the only post Anne was allowed to read before her mother demanded satisfaction were letters addressed from Matlock. Given Lord Matlock was Anne's legal guardian and the trustee of Rosings until such time as Anne married or took full possession of her inheritance, Lady Catherine did not dare cut her brother's seal before handing such letters to Anne. If Henri even suspected that his sister was interfering in his ability to correspond with Anne, it would probably not end well for the domineering lady.

But, legal heir of the property or not, Anne had almost no authority inside the dreary walls of Rosings. In stark contrast to her own home, the servants of Matlock House treated Anne as if she were an independent person of wealth and status, which truthfully she was, and old enough to make her own decisions without input from Lady Catherine, of which, again, she was more than capable. The old Matlock House butler, who had been with the Matlock family since the days of the old philandering Earl, and knew Lady Catherine would not be able to harm his position in the slightest, flat out refused to deliver any messages or post addressed to Miss de Bourgh to her mother first. And not for any lack of screeching on the part of Lady Catherine.

The moment Anne realized that she had an invitation to the Darcys' summer house party and her mother did not, it was almost too much excitement to contain inside her chest always slightly short of breath. Apparently Georgiana had already sent a personal invitation to Lady Catherine who had flatly refused saying that she could absolutely not be spared from Rosings one day more and must to Kent at the departure of the Matlocks. Conveniently, Lady Catherine had not noticed Anne was not included in her invitation, or perhaps she had not fathomed that Anne should be getting a personal invitation, which, even more conveniently, arrived two days after the Darcys received Lady Catherine's negative reply.

Before her mother could make a fuss, Anne asked Lady Matlock which families were confirmed guests and would it be appropriate for her to attend under the protection of her uncle and cousins. Lady Matlock was positively effusive over the confirmed guest list, which included

several titled gentlemen in want of wives, and merely waved her handkerchief at Anne's question about the appropriateness of attending with the Matlocks.

*“Henri is your LEGAL guardian dear, of course it should be perfectly appropriate for you to travel under our protection. Besides, better you spend the remainder of the summer with us than locked away at Rosings. If any suitor wishes to declare himself he shall have to come to the Earl anyway before starting any courtship and the trip from Derbyshire to Kent is quite long.”*

Lady Catherine looked near an apoplexy during the whole conversation of suitors and the open acknowledgement that her brother Henri was technically the guardian whose consent was needed to make a match. Through she kept her tongue in the drawing room, later that evening, Lady Catherine had come to Anne's room to complain about how presumptuous her sister in law was being, and of course Anne had no desire to attend without her mother. Bolstered by the knowledge that her powerful Aunt and Uncle would support her decisions, Anne told her mother that she intended to attend and had already sent her reply to Darcy House. Lady Catherine had complained the next day at breakfast how she knew when she was not wanted and she may as well go home to Rosings if Anne no longer required her presence. She was packed and on her way south before tea time.

Since her mother's early departure from London, Anne had enjoyed many lovely evenings in company without her mother's interference. She was no longer shuffled off to “rest” at a ridiculously early hour, sometimes even before the gentlemen would rejoin the ladies after dinner. The entertainments that Georgie and Miss Elizabeth had planned for the guests had been such a delight! The gardenia oil perfume she had made the other day was some of the best she had ever been able to obtain. And Miss Elizabeth had been so kind to find one of the under gardeners to fetch a large basket of the blooms just for Anne. Most of the other ladies had wanted the more fashionable rose oil perfume and there were limited other choices. Miss Elizabeth had picked lavender blooms for her own personal preference and, knowing that Miss Jane Bennet preference would be for jasmine oil perfume, had ensured a large basket for her older sister. Georgiana had been unable to decide between rose and the apple blossoms Mrs. Reynolds mentioned being Lady Anne Darcy's personal preference, until Miss Mary had stepped up to say she had no strong preference so why not have Mary make the rose and Georgie make the apple then they could share the results. Once most of the ladies were getting

settled into their stations for the demonstration, Elizabeth noticed that Anne was slow to make a choice from amongst the blooms. She asked after Anne's favorite flower and even though Anne had almost made up her mind to go along with the fashionable set and make rose oil, she answered truthfully that gardenias were her very favorite flowers. It was but the work of a few minutes before Anne had a basket overflowing with large pink and blue petals.

Anne de Bourgh had felt so grateful to Miss Elizabeth for her solicitous attention to the moods of the Darcys' guests. In fact, having spent 5 days in their company, Anne was impressed with all of the Bennet sisters. Their manners were clearly those of women of good breeding even if their father had been only a country squire. And, quite against the grain of what her mother had always said, their relative poverty compared to the other titled and rich women of the company, they did not seem to have the air of jealous harpies. All three were wonderfully sweet and capable of intelligent discourse. It was quite the revelation.

Another startling revelation was that, with the absence of her mother's interference, the various available gentlemen who tried to hold her attention were allowed to actually do so. In fact, each evening at Pemberley, the handsome Captain Finch had taken a seat near her in the parlor after dinner to speak of a variety of topics and neither her Aunt nor Uncle had tried to stop their interactions. She very much enjoyed his attentions.

Her mother would probably say that he was just after Anne's fortune since a second son would never be able to afford to support himself and a family on a military salary. But when the Captain spoke to her of books she had always enjoyed and told her of his many adventures at sea, Anne cared not for what material things he might bring to a union. Captain Finch's easy manners, impeccable breeding, gentlemanly humor, and top rate connections were all Anne needed. It also helped that he was very easy to look at across the dining table, as Anne was doing right at this moment. Captain Finch was entertaining the lunchtime diners at the north end of the terrace table with swarthy tails from his last assignment to the continent, but anyone paying close attention could tell that he was performing specifically for Anne. And the Mistress of Rosings was caught on every word.

Lady Matlock smiled to herself. She had always liked her nephew Thurston. He was a dutiful son and a good sailor in His Majesty's Navy. With a disposition much like Richard, he had always been a favorite amongst the dance halls of London, but, also like Richard, with a fortune much too small to tempt many of the young ladies, the

good Captain was as yet unattached. Anne de Bourgh was a perfect match for Captain Finch. Marriage would give her full possession of her inheritance and having spent too many seasons locked away in Kent, the 25 year old heiress would likely be shelved as a spinster if none of the available gentlemen present took a liking to her fortune.

The Countess had seen too many matches between the upper set to believe that Thurston would have ever looked at Anne twice if she were not in possession of a fabulous fortune and significant property. But if the sweet looks being exchanged were any indication of the genuine appreciation shared between the two, the marriage would likely bring both contentment, if not true happiness.

Henri would surely welcome the match as would Lord Nottingham. The Captain could sell his commission and take control of overseeing the Rosings holdings. Lady Matlock also knew that her sister-in-law intended to gift her second son her dowry property, a London townhouse which originally belonged to Lady Nottingham's grandfather, so the couple could get away from Lady Catherine for much of the year. Yes, it would be a wonderful match, and, though she would never admit such an awful thing, knowing Anne's marriage to a second son would likely make Lady Catherine furious brought Lady Matlock much amusement.

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Meryton, Hertfordshire

17 June 1813, Afternoon Tea

Catherine Bennet did not know what to believe anymore.

Her mother had always told her that at 17 years old she should have been enjoying the attentions of many suitors, dancing every evening at the home of some close acquaintance, and flirting outrageously with the unattached men of Hertfordshire. Mr. Bennet and the oldest Bennet sisters had always been less enthusiastic about the overt flirting, but since Kitty considered Jane and Lizzie old maids to have reached 20 without so much as a courtship, she had readily disregarded their advice. Now, 10 months after Lydia's disgrace, the death of her father, and the loss of her home, Kitty's life was a shadow of what it once had been.

Immediately following Lydia's elopement, Kitty thought that the Bennets' troubles would be short lived. Being forced to leave Longbourn had been unsettling to all of the Bennet women, but Kitty viewed Jane and Lizzie's removal from Meryton as the best thing for her personal prospects. With her unsociable father and spinster older sisters hidden in their uncle's Cheepside house, Kitty was sure that all of the attention once lavished on Jane and Lizzie would fall to her.

Poor Catherine was soon to learn that Kitty was woefully unprepared for the reality of her new station in life.

None of the suitors who had so often asked her older sisters to dance spared one glance for Kitty. After Lydia's pregnancy became widely known, there were no more dinner invitations for the Bennet women including to the houses of their closest friends. Even Mr. Darcy's discovery of the marriage ceremony between Lydia and Mr. Wickham did nothing to reverse Meryton's shunning of those Bennets left in Hertfordshire.

Maria Lucas had remained a friend to Kitty, but only until her own presentation at court. The Lucas family had spent the first month of the Season in London with some relatives of Lady Lucas and when Maria came home, she was different. Maria flatly refused to acknowledge Kitty in company and ceased calling at the Phillips's home. Yesterday, after nearly 3 weeks with nary a word in greetings, Kitty had managed to corner Maria in the Meryton Churchyard. She demanded to know why her oldest friend had abandoned their intimate acquaintance.

"We are no longer of the same social status Kitty. I cannot be seen as having a close friend with such poor manners, no connections and no fortune. What man of independent means would ever consider me worthy with such a friend? We are all judged by the company we keep."

Kitty had sat on the stone bench looking at a brightly painted statue of the Virgin with Child until the sun had fallen below the steeple of the church. Finally the growing dark and her hunger forced Kitty back to her Uncle Phillip's home. That evening, a very somber Kitty sat in the drawing room alone well after her family had retired.

Oddly, one of the few servants who had come with Mrs. Bennet from Longbourn, a young maid named Sarah, came to Kitty with a large stack of letters addressed to their mother and herself. They were letters from her absent sisters, most of which had never been opened. Sarah did not say one word, but placed all of the correspondence in

Kitty's lap, pulled a fresh candle from the secretary drawer, and left the room.

Looking through the stack, Kitty instantly recognized each of her sister's handwriting. Jane's letters, ever her mother's favorite, had all been opened and, from the look of the torn corners and the smudges, lovingly read multiple times each. A few of Mary's letters had been opened, but more recent correspondences remained sealed. Lizzie had written the most often, and always with the most pages, but only the very first letter following her departure for Pemberley had been opened. One letter from Lydia, dated less than 8 days after her departure from Meryton was opened, but it seemed that several of the pages had been badly crumpled or torn, and at least one page was certainly missing altogether. None of Lydia's other letters looked to have even been touched.

Since it would give her mind something to do other than dwell on Maria's heartbreaking words, Kitty decided to read what her sisters had felt was important enough to share with their mother.

Each of the four Bennet sisters living in far flung places had dutifully detailed their daily lives as well as sending news of the places they now lived. Kitty found Lizzie's descriptions of the snow covered grounds of Pemberley to be delightful and wondered if Mr. Darcy would allow Lizzie to invite Kitty for a visit next winter just to see the frosted forests. Jane and Mary's letters were full of entertainments in London and it was nearly enough to make Kitty green with envy. But ever the most flippant of Mrs. Bennet's daughters, Kitty found much amusement in the way that, over and over again, each of her sisters would described the same event in so different a way as to make the reader question whether or not they had truly attended the same function. Kitty began alternating Jane and Mary's letters so as to read one sister's account of some outing directly followed by the other's description. After a few such sets, Kitty was stunned to discover that she very strongly preferred Mary's steady descriptions with near zealous attention to detail over Jane's sweet retelling of how generally kind everyone had been.

Mary seemed to paint a picture that Kitty was able to clearly visualize with her words. The glittering of the chandeliers, the ornateness of the dresses, the deep colors of the tapestries on the walls. The most amazing descriptions came from those letters where Mary described some musical entertainment they attended. Though never much of a music lover, Kitty longed to hear the musicians Mary wrote about, if for no other reason than to watch the expressions on her stoic sister's

face for the signs of true enjoyment.

Lydia's letters were left to the last. Kitty had no idea what to expect from her youngest sister, now presumably mother to a child of her own. A child that neither her mother, uncle, nor aunt had ever spoken of. Kitty did not even know if it was a male or female child. She chastised herself internally at so completely forgetting about the trails of anyone else as to never even inquire as to the birth of her first niece or nephew.

Frowning, Kitty looked again at the stack of Lydia's letters. She had managed at least one letter per month, not nearly as often as Lizzie or Jane, but still, her stack was thick. It seemed somewhat irresponsible of their mother to abandon even reading Lydia's letters. What if Lydia had needed help or was not in good health. Many women died from carrying and birthing babies. What if Lydia died and their mother was too stubborn to open the letter carrying such a message?! Obviously, Kitty consoled herself, Lydia had not died since her baby should have been born in the early spring and the latest letter was dated only last week. But still. Anything could have happened.

In the early hours of the dawn, Kitty opened the letters from her younger sister. They had always been very close as young girls, sharing everything. And here, in Kitty's hands sat almost 8 months of Lydia's short life to which Kitty had previously spared nary a thought. Most likely, letters containing accounts of the most important 8 months of Lydia's life.

Kitty had been terrified to open those letters.

Jane, Lizzie, and Mary's letters had been easy to open. Kitty knew they would be filled with the lighthearted pursuits of young women with little to no responsibilities. Even Lizzie who was now in someone's employ was only a social companion and not expected to exert too much in the way of real labour. Only Lydia was no longer just another Bennet sister. She even bore another man's name. Each of her letters had been posted from Mrs. L. Wickham, Scarborough.

Wielding the letter knife as if it were a double edged rapier capable of slashing through solid oak, Kitty began to read Lydia's letters. By the time her Aunt Phillips found her in the drawing room and announced that breakfast was upon the sideboard, Kitty's whole world was upside down.

Lydia seemed genuinely happy.

She wrote of the unmatched kindness of Mr. Darcy's extended family who were sheltering her during her confinement. There were fantastic tales of great big ships pulling blocks of ice up to the beach and quiet descriptions of afternoons spent in the vestibule of the church mending clothing for the poor. The few letters Lydia had written after Thomas's birth were full of wonderment at becoming a mother. She truly seemed to love her little boy more than words could adequately express.

Most of all, Kitty read between the lines of Lydia's letters and found that her little sister was vanished. Silly Lydia who chased after red coats and made herself ridiculous was in whole replaced by a young, industrious mother.

She had even learned at least one new accomplishment. The latest letter from Lydia included a very well done drawing of little Thomas lying in a basket perched on a rock near the shore. In the drawing, his eyes were focused on something or someone just out of the frame and it seemed he was laughing with all the humor and brightness that babies bring to the world. Though Kitty could not know, having never met the child, she believed it to be a wonderful likeness. He had the pointed chin and wide nose that she remembered from Mr. Wickham. His hair was a mop of bouncy loose curls which reminded her of how their father had kept his own coif. But most strikingly were Thomas's eyes. Jane and Kitty had inherited much of their mother's fair coloring with light hair and blue eyes and delicate, long features. Many had remarked how exotic Jane and Kitty's eyes seemed as they somewhat resembled the drawings of women from the far-east.

Lizzie, Mary, and Lydia were darker in complexion like their father had been and, though each was significantly shorter than Mrs. Bennet, Jane, and Kitty, their features were larger and easily distinguished from a distance. Especially their eyes.

Kitty had once teased Lizzie that her eyes were the largest part of her body until she opened her mouth. It was meant to be a bit of a jab and point out the contrast between Kitty's own exotic delicate features and Lizzie's overly large, common ones. But as everyone who has ever tried to tease the most jolly Bennet sister has found out, such remarks will never hit their intended target. Instead those wide brown eyes begin to sparkle, and one side of that wide mouth begins to lift in a silent laugh right before Lizzie delivers a retort with such pretty words that neither the teaser nor the teased feel poorly in the aftermath.

From the charcoal picture it was impossible to tell the color of

Thomas's eyes, but the wide round shape was unmistakably Bennet in look and Lydia somehow had captured how they must sparkle when he laughs.

Kitty had retired to her room after breakfast, having not slept all night, but was woken by her mother's shrill voice just before tea. Now, sitting with her mother and aunt, listening to their idle gossip, Kitty pondered what to do with her sisters' letters.

Clearly their mother was not interested in corresponding regularly with at least 2, and quite probably 3, of her 4 absent sisters.

Perhaps they would each enjoy a letter from herself. She doesn't have much to report in the way of goings on, and it would probably be in poor taste to send Lydia details of the gossip being so carelessly batted between their mother and aunt. Not to mention the fact that Jane, Lizzie, and Mary would not be interested in such reports. Nonetheless, there must be something worth discussing after 8 months of silence.

So, without a word, Kitty removed herself to the secretary where she had spent the majority of the previous night reading her sisters' letters and pulled out 4 sheets of paper. At the top of each page she placed the date and a greeting to each of her 4 sisters. While trying to come upon any topic of conversation at all, Mrs. Bennet finally realized that Kitty had moved.

"Child, what on earth are you doing at your aunt's desk? You mustn't spill ink on your dress else you'll have nothing to wear once my mourning is over and we begin to socialize more frequently again. Now put down that pen and bring me my smelling salts!"

Kitty calmly turned to her mother and replied, "Mother, your salts are on the table right next to your tea saucer. I am planning to write letters to my sisters this evening, but if you prefer it of me, I shall change my dress into something more appropriate and continue my correspondence from my room. Thank you for a lovely dinner Aunt. I believe I shall retire for the night."

Just before Kitty reached the bottom stair that would lead to her bedroom and the welcomed peace, Sarah stepped into the hall with 2 more letters in hand. One from Mary and one from Lizzie, each dated within the last 3 days from Derbyshire. They must have just arrived that day. Kitty thanked Sarah and ascended the stairs in order to attend to her sister's letters. If she was going to make a proper go of her own letters she was going to need to get started as soon as

possible.

Chapter 27: The Chess Tournament

Chapter Summary

Pemberley is full of sporting guests and scheming ladies hoping to out-wit their opponents.

Chapter Notes

We are almost done. After this chapter I only have one more outlined and an epilogue. Thanks for staying with me through the delays here at the end.

Pemberley, Derbyshire

17 June 1813 – After Dinner

"We learn little from victory. Much from defeat." Japanese Proverb

Georgiana was nervous as the end of dinner approached. As the acknowledged hostess, it was her duty to signal the end of the meal and announce the entertainment for the evening. After not quite a sennight of performing the task, tonight was the first time that dessert would be served outside the dining room and the gentlemen and ladies would not be separating. This would require Georgiana to actually speak her invitation to adjourn to the drawing room instead of simply rising from her seat.

After the last of the meats had been cleared from the table, Georgiana looked to her sister-in-law for support. Elizabeth's warm smile and encouraging head nod signaled it was time. Rising delicately from her chair, Georgiana had to start twice before being able to make her voice heard.

"This evening we have planned some joint entertainment. For anyone inclined, we shall be having our dessert in the drawing room and a chess tournament. The winner shall earn a lovely prize to be sure, so there shall be lively competition. For anyone who does not wish to play chess, we shall have whilst tables made up and Cook has made the most lovely fairy cakes. Please follow me to the drawing room."

Without much thought, Georgiana turned her smile upon her dinner partner, which happened to be Mr. Bernard Finch. Bernard was so entrenched by her smile that he rose from the table without sparing a

look for anyone else and offered Georgiana his arm. Most of the adults paying even minimal attention to the interactions of the young people could see how lovely of a couple Georgiana and Bernard made striding arm in arm out of the room. Lady Matlock and Lady Nottingham shared a joyful look at the prospect of seeing two of the Nottingham boys so advantageously settled with Fitzwilliam ladies.

Earlier that day, just following the terrace lunch, Elizabeth had planned an easy afternoon of lawn games and open carriage rides around the house grounds. Seating groups had been constructed near enough to the several games so that those who did not wish to play could enjoy watching the sport but still have enough peace to speak to the other spectators. While Georgiana and Elizabeth battled Richard and Mary in lawn bowling, Darcy took up a seat under the large elm tree. He had just escorted Caroline Bingley, Lady Miranda, Lady Grace and Lady Fiona to the open Landau waiting to take guests on a tour of one of the more picturesque, and *long* riding trails about the grounds. It would be over an hour before the horses made their way back to the formal gardens. Darcy had hoped to have Elizabeth, Jane, Charles Bingley, Mary and Bristol ride with him on the grounds tour, but he had been accosted by all 4 of his shadows the moment he mentioned a relaxing ride to Elizabeth.

Charles had chuckled at the scene, but mostly due to Jane's shocked expression watching 4 "Ladies" each try to each take Darcy's arm and bat her eyelashes coyly. In the end, Charles had forced Caroline to take his arm and leave Darcy alone, had offered his other arm to Jane, and helped Darcy pile the women into the equipage. Just as all the ladies were situated, Charles turned back to the game of lawn bowling and commented how well Georgiana was playing. When Darcy turned to observe the game, Charles climbed in, closed the door, and called to the driver that they were ready to depart. Darcy did not even have to make up an excuse for not attending the ladies as they trotted off without him.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Darcy had wandered to the seating area under the elm with the distinct pleasurable anticipation of watching his wife's face flush a lovely shade of pink with the sporting exercise.

After a very few minutes, Bernard Finch came to take one of the other seats under the elm tree. The young solicitor would have claimed he did not have much of a reason for drifting under that particular elm, but his eyes were more often than not pointed in the direction of one young, pretty, Miss Georgiana Darcy. Now, Fitzwilliam Darcy would

all to soon admit that he was not the best at reading the moods of women. Nor had he ever been the type of man to consciously observe those acts and attitudes of others which feed the gossip mills, but only a blind fool would have missed the way his old friend looked at his sister. It was also clear to Darcy that Georgiana had not been in as high of spirits recently.

Elizabeth remarked to him during a rare moment of relative privacy that Bernard had been keeping a bit of distance from Georgiana during the house party and they could no longer be found after dinner with their heads close discussing some topic of interest to one or the other. In fact, as Darcy thought back over the last 5 days, he did not believe he had seen Bernard on the same side of the room as Georgiana since arriving at Pemberley. The only logical conclusion to Darcy was that the two had quarreled over something and now were not speaking as freely with each other.

Whatever the reason for this new distance, it was making his baby sister unhappy and Darcy had resolved to find some way to rectify the situation. A private audience with Bernard under the elm tree seemed like the perfect time to take matters into his own hands.

“My sister looks very well this afternoon does she not Bernard?”

Bernard jumped nearly into the top branches of the tree at Darcy’s sudden and rather forced outburst. *“I dare say she does Darcy. Miss Darcy has turned into quite the lovely young lady, you must be quite proud of her accomplishments.”*

“I believe I would be proud of my sister if all she had ever accomplished was a sweet disposition and a genuine smile, but yes, her education is quite complete. I only hope that a man worthy of her shall see her true value someday.”

At these words, Bernard bristled inside. Just as he suspected. Darcy did not believe that the mere *third* son of an Earl was good enough for his baby sister’s £30,000 dowry. *“And I suppose that only a man with lands and a mansion to match Pemberley would truly be worthy of Miss Darcy? What is the price that will secure such a beautiful creature? No less than £5,000 per year I’d expect. Well we cannot all be Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley you know.”*

This uncharacteristic outburst from his even mannered friend caught Darcy far off guard. He was now quite sure he knew what had kept Bernard and Georgiana apart, but he could not fathom how his friend

had come to such a conclusion. For not the first time since his ill-fated proposal to Elizabeth in Hunsford, Darcy was grateful that he had learned how to control his own temper and see how sometimes other's reactions to his reserved manner were born from misunderstanding. Additionally, eight months of blissful matrimony with a woman who is frank and open had also taught Darcy that sometime a situation called for clarity of speech, propriety be damned.

“My dear friend, I believe that I shall count a man as worthy of my sister ONLY if he loves her truly and has managed to earn her love in return. Be he a Duke, an under gardener, ... or even a Solicitor. And do not be fooled, it is a much harder thing to find such a man than one who merely has an income of £5,000 per year. I have more than enough means to provide for Georgiana and any man she chooses as worthy of her affections. Though I must say, I do not believe someone owning a fine London townhouse with 8 bedrooms and a valued position advising members of Parliament constitutes a man in need of my support.”

Only stunned silence followed Darcy's declaration that he would welcome Bernard as a brother in law. After another few minutes, Goodwin joined Darcy and Bernard under the elm tree and Darcy called for a tray of lemonade. While some conversation did flow between the three relaxing gentlemen, the majority of their remaining time on the lawn was spent watching Elizabeth, Georgiana, Mary, and Richard play lawn bowling. Though truthfully, none of the spectators took any notice of Richard.

Eventually the games were packed away and the Landau returned to the garden just in time to see Darcy disappear into the manor house through the terrace doors with Elizabeth on his arm, laughing jovially at something she had just said. Four very annoyed ladies and one content couple made their way back across the lawn in order to ascend the grand staircase and change for dinner.

Darcy was able to relay to Elizabeth his conversation with Bernard and the Mistress of Pemberley had ensured that the dinner seating arrangement was adjusted to have Bernard seated right next to Georgiana. With any luck, they could finally come to an understanding and perhaps even make a joyous announcement during the ball in a week's time!

Now, the whole party made their way to the drawing room following the oblivious couple who only had eyes for each other through Pemberley's refined hallways. Many of the older adults not to join the tournament but most took seats near the tables to watch the young

people enjoy the art of beating an opponent in a game of wits. Of course some of the more prominent figures in the room took their place among the players. When Lady Sefton took her place opposite Lady Miranda, the young woman looked as if she would be sick.

“Do not worry so my dear. If you should beat me I will only delay your admittance to Almack’s by a few weeks. Hardly anyone comes during the little season anyway.”

The wicked glint in Lady Sefton’s eye told Darcy right away that she was merely teasing Lady Miranda, but then again, he was more than familiar with such teasing from a pair of fine eyes. The joke was completely lost on the young lady. Even though Lady Miranda was a well-practiced chess player, she failed to see Lady Sefton’s bishop which took her queen within 5 moves, and the match deteriorated from there.

As the host, Darcy decided he should not play but encouraged everyone else to take a place. In an attempt to tease him in some manner that she had observed elicited a positive reaction from the Master of Pemberley when coming from Georgiana or Elizabeth, Lady Fiona laid her hand on Darcy’s forearm and said, “If you do not know how to play, I’m sure we could use one of the tables and I can instruct you in the rules.”

Darcy was quick to extricate himself from Lady Fiona’s grasp and replied with his cold mask firmly in place. “I am perfectly well versed in the rules of the game Lady Fiona and I believe it would be poor manners if I ignored my guests in order to win a tournament where the prize is something that I already own.”

Before she could stop herself, Georgiana made a very unladylike snort and commented, “As if you would be the victor dear brother as Elizabeth has just taken her place against Captain Finch.”

Caroline Bingley choose this moment to interject herself back into the spotlight of the party. She had been seething all day and trying desperately to remain clam in this house where an unseemly outburst would not be covered up by her own loyal servants. First thing this morning, she had spied Darcy out of her bedchamber window walk out into the out-of-date and over large rose garden to fetch Eliza, presumably into breakfast. Then she had been unlucky in choosing a seat too quickly at luncheon and could scarcely see Darcy, who was sitting between Lady Grace and Lady Fiona. But the final straw had been that ridiculous ride around the grounds.

How Dare Charles!

She had finally schemed such that the only available seat left in the Landau was directly across from her with a perfect viewing angle for her dangerously low cut décolletage and Charles takes off before Darcy could even so much as glance at her ample assets.

Once she was back in the manor house, Caroline resolved to increase her offensive tactics but she would have to tread carefully. These sorts of campaigns required precision and sharp attention so as to not squander any opportunity. Georgiana's remarks gave Caroline the perfect beginning.

"My dear Eliza, do many of the *other* Pemberley servants play chess? I would not think that such a game lends itself well to someone without the *formal education* only available to the finest of society."

Darcy and Georgiana both bristled at the implication that Elizabeth should spend her evenings in the company of the servants or that she was uneducated merely because she did not attend some rather expensive finishing school for the elite of London.

"Miss Bingley, I'm not sure Elizabeth has ever played chess against the multitude of Pemberley's staff who are educated in the game, but I believe my sister was referring to Elizabeth's winning record against myself and Georgie from this past winter and spring. At last count I believe Elizabeth was winning nearly 50 games to Georgiana's 18 and my dismal handful of wins." Darcy slipped easily into dropping the "Miss" when speaking of Elizabeth, and it did not go unnoticed.

Truthfully, unlike Caroline, Darcy had had a glorious day. After breakfast with Elizabeth and a handful of other guests who were early risers, he had spent a few hours in productive meetings with his steward. Lunch had been enjoyable, even with the constant attentions of Lady Grace and Lady Fiona, since he had noticed a new addition to Jane Bennet's left third finger. His talk with Bernard meant that there were no more barriers to a wonderful match for Georgiana. And the final crowning jewel to the day had been when Goodwin had approached him before the dinner hour to ask permission to court Mary Bennet for the remainder of the house party and if Darcy would do him the great honor of introducing Goodwin to her Uncle.

With three of their sisters nearly settled with respectful, thoughtful, and well situated men, Darcy was feeling very secure. Surely if Jane, Georgiana, and Mary were all engaged or being formally courted by

such men, Elizabeth would consent to announcing their own marriage very soon. Darcy could see how the stress of the situation was wearing on his beautiful Elizabeth, not to mention he was personally looking forward to demanding respect for his wife's position be given by all of the mercenary, gossiping "ladies" of the *ton* who would not even look Elizabeth in the eye this past season. Using her Christian name without the title propriety demanded was Darcy's way of declaring her as part of his household as more than mere staff.

"Well, than," Caroline sneered, "I hope I shall have the pleasure of matching wits with Eliza before the tournament is over."

The night turned out to be wonderful fun for everyone involved. Darcy served as the tournament master, declaring match winners and drawing up the next pairs until the 20 or so players were reduced to just four. Even though chess is considered a game of strategy and therefore more suited to a man's mind than a woman's, the final 4 players were Caroline v. Lady Fiona and Lady Grace v. Elizabeth. Never let it be underestimated the cunning and strategic dominance of Ladies of the London *ton*, especially those in the marriage mart.

Lady Fiona was a fierce competitor but lost her King to Caroline at the end.

Lady Grace and Elizabeth played a strained game. Even though there was no possible way that Lady Grace could have been mistake as to Elizabeth's name, she repeatedly referred to her opponent as "Elinore" or "Emily" and once "Ashley". In Lady Grace's mind, it was a degradation to be playing opposite the paid companion, a *servant* for goodness sake, and the correct form of address to someone so wholly beneath herself was unnecessary.

Elizabeth was becoming worried for Darcy reaction to the deliberate disrespect and thankfully recognized Lady Grace's aggressive style of play nearly immediately. Even when the Lady was faced with an obviously loosing board, she did not alter her attack style. She continued her fruitless campaign and aggressive stance even when Elizabeth moved in on Lady Grace's queen. Truly believing that power and connections make one superior in life, it came as a shock to the ill-mannered Lady when, first her queen is taken by a pawn, and then Elizabeth gets within 2 moves of actually taking her king. By the time Lady Grace decided to perhaps pay more attention to the game than to her attempts to degrade Elizabeth, it is too late. When Lady Grace actually takes full stock of Elizabeth's pieces placed on the board, she realized that she is in Check and has only one move, which Elizabeth

will counter immediately with another Check, leaving Lady Grace with again only one move. After the second volley, Elizabeth will move into check-mate. Elizabeth had quite successfully cornered Lady Grace into a trap.

After a break for some coffee and more cake, the final match between Caroline and Elizabeth is set up at a table in the center of the drawing room. Some of the guests had retired, but a majority of Pemberley's inhabitants, including a larger number of upstairs servants than were strictly assigned to attend the drawing room, gathered to watch who would be the victor.

The game lasted for nearly an hour. Both Caroline and Elizabeth had lost many pieces during the battle. Neither opponent is speaking much, either to each other or the spectators, but the late hour does nothing to dampen the energy in the room.

Ultimately, Caroline makes a surprising play and sacrifices her rook to thrust her queen, hiding just behind, into play. Elizabeth is almost taken off guard, but she manages to stop the attack by sacrificing her own queen. Without her most valuable piece, Elizabeth is unable to ward off Caroline who manages to sneak a pawn behind Elizabeth's defenses and trap the King. At nearly midnight, Caroline is declared the winner.

Elizabeth herself presented Caroline with the evening's prize, a beautiful set of overlarge silk handkerchiefs finely embroidered with a scrolling **P** for Pemberley and the Darcy family crest.

Having learned little from her life of easy victories over supposed rivals and secure in the belief that she was so close to completing her grandfather's life work, Caroline took the prize as a sign that she was destined to become the next Mistress of this grand estate. With the evening's entertainments ended, all of Pemberley's inhabitants head to their beds.

Caroline ascends the grand stairs towards Pemberley's guest wing and makes the decision to wait no longer. Her new life would begin tomorrow. Pulling a long chain out of her pocket, Caroline looked down at the small but powerful object secreted away in the folds of her silk evening gown. Her maid had performed magnificently in procuring the item and now nothing would stand in Caroline's way to getting everything she's ever deserved.

Chapter 28: Check Mate

Chapter Summary

The Darcys and all their house guests find out exactly what Caroline was planning.

Chapter Notes

Here is the first installment of the final chapter. It grew very long and I decided to post in pieces for readability. Enjoy.

Pemberley, Derbyshire

18 June 1813 – Early Morning

Jane Bennet could not claim to be a true early riser having lived her whole life with Elizabeth and Mary. In fact, Jane can only recall a handful of times in her life when she rose before her sister Elizabeth, and at least 3 of those times were due to Lizzie taking ill. But when compared to the ladies of leisure who kept "town hours" even while in the country, Jane was certainly up and about well before the fashionable hour.

This particular morning, Jane had woken very early indeed. Ever the dutiful daughter, she felt the need to write several letters regarding her engagement to Charles Bingley the day before. Her mother needed to know soon of their plan to wed at Pemberley near the end of August and hopefully accommodations could be made for the rest of her family to join the Gardiners on their northern journey.

Another reason for Jane rising early this morning was the fervent desire to speak privately with her sister Elizabeth before the rest of the guests woke and demanded her attention. The past week had been a trial for Jane, knowing that this was Elizabeth's home, the place she was rightfully Mistress, but watching the others treat her beloved sister with such disdain. Without disclosing Lizzie and Darcy's secret, Jane had spoken the Charles about the protection of her sisters after their marriage and her fiancé had assured her that the Bennet family would be well cared for, even Mrs. Wickham and the baby. If they wanted to live with Charles and Jane for the rest of their lives, he would support them, regardless of whether Jane's sisters never married or married men of lesser means. He would always keep his home open to the Bennet women.

Jane wanted to speak to Elizabeth about being able to finally call and end to her secret marriage. Even if Lizzie was not yet ready to come clean with all of society, surly their families and close friends should be told. If the interactions between Miss Darcy and Mr. Bernard Finch last night were any indication, she need not worry about her newest sister's future happiness and from now on, Jane and Charles were going to help shoulder the worry for the three youngest Bennet sisters.

After completing the letter to her mother, Jane asked the maid who had been attending her at Pemberley if the Mistress was awake yet. It had been a small pleasure of Jane's to be able to speak freely with the young maid, Amy. Since the Pemberley staff all know of the Darcys' wedding last October and are extremely loyal to the Darcy family, Jane had felt comfortable acknowledging her sister's position while in the privacy of her own rooms. An added bonus was that Jane had gleaned many comforting details of her sister's life in Derbyshire. Amy relayed that the Master and Mistress seemed very much in love and had spent a great many happy days together over the winter and spring.

Amy replied that she had not seen the Mistress's maid in the kitchens yet which would indicate that her Mistress had completed her morning toilette, but that she was sure to be awake soon. Jane asked if Amy would bring her a tray with tea, toast, and some fruit to bring to her sister's room as she desired a private audience.

Several minutes later, Jane was walking down the family wing corridor with a lovely tea service and some light edibles when a blood curdling scream issued from the door just behind her at the top of the family staircase. Jane whipped around in time to see the door to the Master's suite thrown wide by an unfamiliar maid. Colonel Fitzwilliam and several footmen were barreling down the halls towards the door and Jane could see Charles's red head pop out from around the corner which leads to the guest wing farther down the hall.

With bile beginning to gather in her stomach, Jane took a few steps towards the open door she knew lead to her brother-in-law's bedchamber. From her position in the hall, she was the first to see the sight of Caroline Bingley sitting up in Fitzwilliam Darcy's bed, obviously unclothed and clutching the bedsheet to her breast, a most wicked smile gracing her usually stoic features.

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Elizabeth woke to the startling sound of crashing dishes in the family

wing corridor. She had been sound asleep much later than her usual wont, but it had been a late night for her and her husband.

After the chess tournament, Elizabeth, Darcy, and Georgiana said goodnight to their guests and headed up the family wing stairs together. Darcy noticed that Elizabeth leaned a little heavier on his arm than usual and the dark circles under her eyes concerned him greatly. They may be maintaining the facade of employer and employee for a bit longer, but he was not going to shirk his duty as her husband for anything. After escorting his wife and sister to their adjoined bedchambers, he went to his dressing room and quickly changed for bed. Then Darcy traversed the 5 doors between his room and his wife's temporary room, being careful to lock all of the doors, even the ones leading back to the Master and Mistress's suite from the nursery, to inquire after her health.

Contrary to what he expected, Elizabeth was not angry with her husband's presence in her bedchamber. She had been having a hard time sleeping through the night recently and overly tired during the day. She conceded that the chances of being discovered were very low and asked William to stay with her that night, a request which he was more than happy to oblige.

The Master and Mistress of Pemberley slept quite soundly wrapped in each other's' arms all night.

Just as the first hint of light started to fill the sky, Darcy's valet, Connor, knocked loudly on the bedchamber where his employer slept. A very urgent note had been delivered by the 16-year-old son of the Darcy's nearest neighbor, Elisha Masters. A fire had broken out at one of the tenant homes during the night and Elisha's father was in Scotland on business so could not be reached. The young man had never handled such a disaster on his own before and called on his nearest neighbor for help. Mr. Masters had been a very great help to Darcy when he was just 22 and had taken the whole responsibility of Pemberley following old Mr. Darcy's death, so of course Fitzwilliam Darcy did not even have to blink before calling to have his horse saddled.

Connor knew that his Master had shared his wife's bed that night, so he did not even bother going into the Master's bed chamber that morning before waking Darcy. Connor had retrieved work clothes from Darcy's dressing room and entered the Mistress's temporary chamber through the servant's entrance. Darcy was dressed and in his saddle just as the rooster started his first morning crow.

Elizabeth had gone back to sleep for a few hours. She was sleeping very deeply but briefly opened her eyes when she thought she heard someone yell. A moment later she closed her eyes again until a loud crash in the hallway made her sit straight up in her bed. Then the growing sound of voices just outside her door concerned the Mistress greatly. Elizabeth was just donning her dressing gown when her abigail, Marianne, burst into her room looking quite wild in the eyes.

"My God Marianne, whatever is the matter?!?"

Marianne had left her mistress before Mr. Darcy had come to his wife the night before and was unaware of the sleeping arrangements of the prior night. Having heard only that one of the unwed young women had been found in the Master's bed this morning, she was completely unprepared for how to tell Mrs. Darcy of what was being said in the house that morning. "Mistress, I must beg you not to go out into the hall. Something dreadful has happened! Please, you must wait here in your rooms until Mrs. Reynolds can find the master and provide the facts of the situation."

"Whatever are you talking about Marianne? Mr. Darcy left very early this morning to help young Elisha Masters deal with a fire on one of the tenant farms. It is unknown when he shall return, but I do not expect he shall appear until the last of the flames are put out and the family has been situated in a temporary home. Now tell me immediately what has happened to have you in such a state."

"Mistress, please excuse my unpardonable rudeness, but do you know where Mr. Darcy spent the last night?"

Elizabeth was now too angry and impatient to even become embarrassed at such an inquiry. Marianne and Connor had all too often seen the evidence of Mr. and Mrs. Darcy's preferred sleeping arrangements. "Though I cannot imagine why it should be anyone's business but our own, Mr. Darcy spent the night in the bed here with me."

"The whole night madam?"

"Yes! The whole night Marianne! Have you ever know Mr. Darcy to leave me in the middle of the night? Now I demand once again that you tell me what has happened or I shall march straight out that door and find someone who WILL tell me."

The commotion in the hall and in the bedchamber adjourning her own had drawn Georgiana out of bed. Hearing Elizabeth's uncharacteristic

raised voice had Georgiana barging into her sister's room without even knocking just in time to hear Marianne's explanation.

"Forgive me Mistress, but while I was fetching fresh towels for you this morning, I saw Connor and Jon Grayson huddled together and saying something about a horrid scandal to be had. Then in the servants stairs I heard the screaming that surly woke the devil himself. A moment later, of the guest maids, I believe Miss Bingley's personal maid, came barreling down the back staircase saying quite loudly that some young miss had been found in Mr. Darcy's bed this morning. I could hardly believe my ears, but when I arrived in the main hallway, there was a crowd gathered about the master's chamber door and your sister Miss Jane dropped Lady Anne's best china tea set after seeing into the room. I rushed right here and that is all I know, I swear it my lady."

Elizabeth palled but kept her head, which was a good thing for she barely heard Georgiana's gasp behind her before the younger lady started to swoon. Elizabeth was just able to make it to Georgiana before she hit her head on the hard floor.

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After the whole of the house, including the servants, had gone to bed the night of the chess tournament, Caroline Bingley quietly takes the spare Pemberley master key pilfered from Mrs. Reynolds's office by her maid out of the pocket of her evening dress. It had taken the stupid servant 5 whole days to find her way into the old housekeeper's private office, and Caroline had to supply the girl with lessons in picking a lock the evening before, but Caroline finally had her true prize. It was a rather small piece of brass for something so very powerful. This little key could open any door in the whole of the house, including the bedchambers of the family wing.

Tonight Caroline would make her move.

Winning at chess had been child's play to the confident, educated, moneyed, Caroline Bingley. Taking the title as the best player amongst the guests had been satisfying, but beating Eliza in the final match had been pure poetry. That no-class chit had to see that she could never compete with Caroline Bingley. It was absurd! And more than a little obscene. All of the Ladies had been whispering behind their fans that Eliza had allowed Mr. Darcy to take her as his mistress, and with Georgiana still in the house no less! Did the penniless *servant* think that just because she had bedded him that he would design to actually

marry her?! HA! It was such a grand joke!

The irony of Caroline's own plan to secure the position of Mistress (with a CAPITAL M, thank you very much) was totally lost on the lady.

Once she was sure that she would not be disturbed, Caroline made her way across the house and to the ornately carved door which lead to the Mistress suite. Perhaps it was a bit naïve and somewhat romantic, but Caroline wanted to come to Mr. Darcy for the first time from the Mistress's bedchamber instead of from the hall or the sitting room. She would act as if she was already Mistress of this house instead of some conniving harlot. Her plan was to open the adjourning door, come into the room and when he asked what she was doing in his bedchamber, she would remove her night-shift and join him in his bed. If even half of what the young ladies tittered about was true, no man would be able to resist the invitation of a bare, beautiful woman in his bed.

Alerting the rest of the house to her whereabouts would again fall to her maid. Caroline did not like giving such an important task to so untested of a servant, but she must appear as if she was innocent in the seduction and embarrassed of her actions. She could not boast about her conquest as the men are said to do in their clubs. Therefore, it was necessary to have her maid go about spreading the word.

Upon entering the Mistress's chambers, Caroline notices that the room has been redone recently, certainly since the passing of the late Lady Anne Darcy almost 17 years ago. For a moment Caroline pauses to consider her actions. If Mr. Darcy has gone to the expense to have the Mistress's rooms updated, then surely he intends to take a wife soon. Since Caroline cannot fathom he would choose another, she briefly though that tonight's deception was perhaps unnecessary. But then the sparkling eyes of Eliza Bennet rose to the front of her mind and she continued on.

Caroline's last thought as she unlocked the door between the Mistress's and Master's bedchambers was that it, while the furnishing had been done in attractive and expensive fabrics, Caroline preferred a much more ornate style, so it shall need redoing again.

An annoyed huff is all that escaped Caroline's well-honed control upon finding the Master's chamber devoid of her prey. How is she to seduce an empty bed?!? Well, no matter. She'll just have to soldier on. It would have been a much better thing to secure her position with

allowing Mr. Darcy to bed her immediately, but she doesn't actually need Mr. Darcy to be present right now in order for her plan to work. Just being found in his bed shall be more than adequate to ensure she is thoroughly compromised and Mr. Darcy has no choice but to marry her with haste.

Caroline discarded her dressing gown and night-shift onto the floor, then crawled into the massive bed. She decided that there is no need to disturb her sleep waiting for Mr. Darcy to come up from whatever business he was tending in the master's study, and Caroline drifted off into a deep peaceful sleep shortly after closing her eyes.

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Charles Bingley had slept wonderfully all night with the most wonderful dreams of finally being married to his angel. Unfortunately his slumber had ended much too early when his valet, Jon Grayson, had come into his room with disturbing news. His sister's maid was looking for Caroline without much luck.

According to the maid, Caroline had come to her room after winning the chess tournament last night, changed for bed, then dismissed her maid to read a bit before retiring. Early in the morning, the dutiful maid had come to her mistress's room to stroke the fire but found the bed had not been disturbed. She claimed to have searched the library, the music room, the public parlors, and even some of the second story sitting rooms without any luck.

Though Caroline's newest personal maid had never so much as spoke to Grayson in the approximately 8 months of serving Caroline, it was this morning that she came asking for help locating the young lady. She was instant that Grayson wake his master and sound the alarm in general throughout the household. Grayson was immediately suspicious, especially since he and Charles had suspected Caroline to try something untoward in order to trap Darcy into marriage. She was nearing her 28th birthday and becoming increasingly desperate in her pursuit of the Master of Pemberley.

Charles listened to Grayson with a growing sense of worry. They agreed that Grayson should go find his brother, Connor, and get any additional information available. Also, they decided to call for Mrs. Reynolds and perhaps the Colonel to help keep the situation quiet.

After leaving Charles to get dressed for the day, Grayson found Connor in the servant's hallway just outside the family wing pacing

and muttering to himself. The brothers retreated to the family wing linen closet to discuss what had happened that morning.

Connor relayed that he had just gone into his Master's bedchamber for the first time that day as Mr. Darcy was called away to deal with a fire early. As is his habit, Connor entered through the well-oiled valet's door quietly then stopped suddenly when he noticed something out of place on the floor: a ladies night-shift. Looking up, he had just seen Miss Caroline Bingley asleep in Mr. Darcy's bed. If they didn't keep this quiet, there would be a dreadful scandal in the house, what with four Earls, Lady Sefton, and all of the Fitzwilliam's currently as guests.

As Connor and Grayson went to find their aunt, Mrs. Reynolds, Charles was knocking on the door to Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam's room. A small search party of only the most trustworthy footmen and maids was assembled under the Colonels command and they set off to look for the wayward young woman.

Marianne was not the only maid to overhear Connor and Grayson's plan to keep the missing young woman from general notice. Caroline's maid had also stayed close enough to know if her mistress's plan to alert the whole household was to be implemented. Caroline had instructed the young maid that if her brother did not make an immediate and loud fuss over her disappearance, the maid was to come to the master's chambers and make her own fuss.

# Chapter 29: Consequences

## Chapter Summary

The truth will finally be known.

## Chapter Notes

Thanks for sticking with me. This chapter details the chaos I left hanging on a cliff. There will be one more wrap-up and then it's finally done.

### *Pemberley, Derbyshire*

**18 June 1813**

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam was in shock. This could not be happening. It was unthinkable. His stoic, uptight, morally untouchable cousin could not have taken a maiden into his bed with a house full of respectable guests and the lady's own family under roof. There was something terribly wrong with this picture, but Richard could not readily figure out what it was. The crashing tea service brought the seasoned military man back to the real world. He was trying to come up with some plan of action in how to salvage this situation, but before he could say anything, a strong female voice to his right started barking out commands as if she regularly commanded the whole of the King's Army.

Jane Bennet quickly regained her equilibrium after dropping the breakfast tray and decided that only quick action by someone who knew the secrets of the Darcys' would save them now.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam, we need Mr. Darcy now. Go find his valet and bring him here at once. Charles, escort Caroline to her rooms and ensure that she dresses appropriately for the morning. And someone fetch me Mrs. Reynolds at once!"

Sparing one small glance for Caroline as Charles forcefully dragged his sister from the room, Jane muttered "Oh Caroline, what have you done to yourself now?" only loud enough for Caroline herself to hear. It was a bit unnerving to see the pity in Jane Bennet's customarily kind eyes, but Caroline resolved to put it out of her mind. Jane was no more than a guest in the Darcys' home, the same as all the others and surely had no greater insight as to what Mr. Darcy would do than the

sister of his best friend of more than 5 years.

Turning to another upstairs maid who had been part of the search party, which was now without a lost guest to find, Jane ordered the broken dishes and mess to be cleaned at once. Another maid was ordered to rush to the kitchens and have breakfast redistributed between the Master's study and the yellow parlor, each which should be hastily prepared to receive the Darcys' guests.

Soon after both maids rushed off to their tasks, Charles, Richard, the Grayson brothers, and Mrs. Reynolds appeared back in the family hallway outside the Master suite. Jane asked Mrs. Reynolds to find them a room in which to speak and the whole assembled party was shuffled into the Master's private sitting room.

Connor and Mrs. Reynolds quickly relayed the whereabouts of Mr. Darcy and stated without ambiguity that their Master had not spent the night in his rooms. Without saying exactly where he had slept the night in question, Connor stated that Mr. Darcy had taken to working in his study late at night and resting on the long couch in front of the fire there. The only thing he would say for sure in such mixed company was that he knew as a fact that Mr. Darcy did not touch that harpy and was most certainly still ignorant of her intrusion into his bedchamber.

As everyone agreed Darcy was needed at home immediately, Richard offered to wake his brother and ride out to the scene of the fire in order to retrieve Darcy and leave Huntley with Elisha to continue providing support to the young man in dealing with the tenant house fire.

Richard was also tasked with telling his father to gather all of the men into the Master's study in short order. They needed to contain this situation quickly, but it was futile to think that it would not be well known to everyone in the household before the eggs were cold. Hopefully the Earls, each of whom had a close personal connection to the Darcy household, would agree that the best action was to stop this from spreading across the whole *ton*.

Mrs. Reynolds set out to find Elizabeth and Georgiana and make sure that all of the ladies were brought to the yellow parlor for breakfast and to await further instructions. Upon entering Elizabeth's temporary bedchamber, Mrs. Reynolds transferred her internal household tasks to Lillian and Marianne, who already had the two Darcy women fed and dressed for the day. Elizabeth and Georgiana, still looking too pale

after this morning's shock, headed to the first floor in order to greet any guests who came down the stairs looking for breakfast.

In all of the confusion and chaos, no one noticed Mrs. Reynolds slip out the door leading to the side of the house or her subsequent brisk escape down the lane towards the servants' hamlet village of Pemberley.

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With Darcy gone helping his neighbor with a tenant house fire, Lord Matlock tried to take control of the men's discussion in the Master's study, but the room was in a complete uproar! Richard had been able to relay the basics of the situation before taking off with Huntley towards the Masters tenant property. Before the aging Earl had been able to shake the sleep from his eyes and call for his valet, his wife had come bursting into his bedchamber to shriek about how every one of the guests' maids knew that Caroline Bingley had been found in Darcy's bed that morning.

Lady Matlock had been in hysterics! Both her sister-in-law and her cousin were ordering their bags be packed and the carriages ready for departure within the hour! She lamented that the Darcy name, and by association, the Fitzwilliam name, would be utterly ruined. Henri must DO SOMETHING! Lord Matlock tried his best to calm his overwrought wife. He assured her that plans were already in motion and there would be a solution to this dilemma well before any news reached London. Lady Matlock had returned to her chambers and ordered some very strong tea to try and calm herself before facing the other Countesses for the day.

Now Lord Matlock sat behind Darcy's massive ebony desk and tried to make plans with the other Earls but no one would stop shouting.

Can't let the Darcy name get a scandal!!

The wedding must take place as soon as possible.

The bishop in Nottingham can issue a special license today if necessary.

Lords Nottingham and Derby generally agreed that a marriage must take place within the sennight, but each disputed who should be the bride. The Darcy name was what was important, and the Darcy money. As long as the Master of Pemberley married quickly, it wouldn't matter that he had compromised some little social climbing trade chit. Caroline would be the one scandalized. The only thing that

seemed to be of general agreement was that no matter what, the upstart could never be the Mistress of Pemberley and should be sent back to her father's Yorkshire mills where she belongs. Darcy should marry one of the more appropriate daughters of the nobility present. They could easily hush up all this unpleasantness as long as Caroline never comes back to London.

Lord Matlock was inclined not to completely ruin a young woman, especially ones with ties to Sefton but was surprised to hear that the compromised lady's brother would not sanction the marriage.

Charles had joined the more illustrious men and made his way to the desk containing Lord Matlock by relying on his position as the brother of the ruined lady in question. His main goal for the morning was to protect Darcy as long as possible and try to disabuse the Lords of any notion that Darcy would be marrying anyone (except maybe Elizabeth). Charles surprised many in the room by adamantly asserting that he will not sanction the marriage since his sister clearly was the one to blame for the present situation. He would rather send her off to Scotland than force his friend to marry such a conniving and immoral woman. As a last ditch attempt to deter the conversation away from any immediate marriage, Charles loudly announced to Lord Matlock that if Darcy's Uncle insists on such a match, Bingley would not release Caroline's dowry since she had overspent her allowance for so long. Charles also made several statements that he was sure Darcy had not even seen Caroline in his bed since he had been taken away quite early to deal with the fire. Whether it was true or not, Charles let the men believe that Caroline had snuck into the Master's chambers after the first light of day, and therefore well after the room's occupant had ridden out to help his neighbor.

Unnoticed by most of the men, Lady Sefton sat demurely in a chair by the window, watching the men act like headless chickens trying to make sense of this new world. She had wanted to come with the men to ensure that Caroline did not receive what she really wanted by so shameless a maneuver. Much to her surprise and delight, her great nephew's brother-in-law was holding his own.

Nearly one hour after the shouting had begun, the Lords in the room still had not made any progress as to what Darcy should do or who he should be forced to marry. Finally, the door to the study opened with a loud *BANG!* For one blissful second, all the commotion ceased while everyone turned their heads to the door and spied the man himself, Fitzwilliam Darcy, covered in soot and looking a bit singed around the edges step into the room. After the span of no more than the time it

takes to blink once, the cacophony of voices started again, louder this time, shouting out directions and demands to the Master of Pemberley.

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The noise of the Master's study was a staggering contrast to the absolute silence in the yellow parlor. Lady Nottingham, Lady Darby, and the Dowager Bristol had given orders to have their trunks packed and ready to leave immediately. Their daughter's trunks were also being packed, under much protestation from the hopeful ladies who each believed that their father or brother would get them installed as the next Mrs. Darcy instead of the unworthy trade trollop. When each titled lady finally appeared in the makeshift breakfast room, dressed in traveling clothes instead of morning dresses, no one said a word. Georgiana had no idea how to handle a situation such as this and Elizabeth felt it a much better thing to keep her head down until she could speak to William about what he wanted to do to contain the situation.

Mary and Jane Bennet were conspicuously absent from the parlor, at least conspicuously from Elizabeth's perspective, since truthfully none of the other ladies even noticed them when they were present. Jane had taken up the post of commander of the household, directing maids and footmen around and commandeering the Mistress's study to write several letters which needed to be sent express. One was to go to Uncle Edward, another to their mother, and a third was to be sent to the Darcys' solicitor requesting a copy of the Darcy marriage special license certified by the issuing Bishop be obtained immediately. Mary had retreated to the music room after one cup of tea, unable to remain in the parlor with so much hostility and what she perceived as the crushed hopes of her older sister.

Anne de Bourgh and Lady Marianne Fitzwilliam had both been blissfully unaware of the morning's uproar since both were quite heavy sleepers and not at all interested in the marriage prospects of their stodgy cousin. The two young female cousins, very close in age and becoming close in spirit since Lady Catherine and Anne's summer stay in at Matlock House, had come down the stairs with linked arms giggling about the antics of Captain Finch during luncheon yesterday. One look at the mood of the room, and a particularly dreadful glare from Lady Matlock, was all the impetus Marianne and Anne needed to turn on their heels and request a tray be brought to the east terrace.

Finally, more than three quarters of an hour after the breakfast things

had been laid out on the side table in the parlor, Caroline Bingley and her sister, Louisa Hurst, made an appearance at the door to the yellow parlor. Caroline was dressed in her finest day dress wearing, not one, but two jeweled silver combs in her orange hair and matching emerald drop pendant neck choker and earrings. It was totally inappropriate for breakfast, but what did Caroline care. Today was to be her finest triumph and she was going to enjoy every minute. With her head held high, Caroline marched straight to the head of the table, which had a chair but no table setting since, officially, Pemberley did not have a Mistress. Caroline sat down and asked the nearest footman to bring her some fresh tea and a place setting. The startled footman looked to Elizabeth for direction and rather than start a new fuss, Elizabeth gave a short nod allowing the servants to proceed catering to Caroline's rude and presumptive behaviour. At least Louisa had the good manners to look properly embarrassed.

Caroline proceeded to give overly demeaning and often nonsensical orders to the servants. She demanded that a whole new spread of morning breads be brought to the table because there was not nearly enough for the caliber of persons at the table. Next, Caroline declared that the béchamel sauce was far too salty (*it most certainly was NOT*) and the Cook should have a new batch made immediately. When she was not berating the servants, Caroline was asking one sided questions of the other ladies at the table and proceeded to ignore their angry silent replies. In such a situation, most women of quality would have left the table the moment Caroline walked into the room, but each was too hell-bent on seeing the ridiculous woman put in her place to move one inch away from the yellow parlor.

Elizabeth prayed silently in her seat that William would be back soon and this whole ridiculous event would be put to rest. With the security and assurance of a woman who loved and trusted her husband implicitly, Elizabeth spared a few sad thoughts for Caroline's pitiable future. Perhaps William and Charles would be able to find someone to take her for her dowry, preferably far away from the *ton* and Derbyshire.

Caroline's absurd behaviour combined with the hostility of the room was beginning to wear on Elizabeth's continued fatigue. Apparently one night of mostly uninterrupted sleep was still not enough to dispel her lingering tiredness. Only a moment before Elizabeth decided to actually escape the parlor and search for Mrs. Reynolds to get an update on William's location, Lady Sefton, who had been absent all morning, made a grand entrance. She came in with a flurry, boasting a bright, cheerful smile, strolled right up to Elizabeth's chair, and took



Elizabeth's hand between her own.

"My *dear* Mrs. Darcy, how wonderful it is to finally be free to acknowledge your position in company. I cannot tell you how lovely this house party has been, and so much excitement! You simply must let me tell you that I have not been so entertained in many years."

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Darcy and the men of the Masters property had barely managed to extinguish the flames which destroyed one home and were threatening at least 2 more when Richard and Huntley came through the clearing in the trees that lead to the road back to Pemberley at full speed. Darcy's stomach dropped at the look in Richard's eyes. He knew that look. It was the same look Richard had sported when he rode up to Darcy House in London personally carrying the express letter announcing the death of Darcy's father.

All of a sudden Darcy was running towards his cousins trying desperately to learn what could have possibly happened in the less than 4 hours since he had left the manor house.

"Good God! Richard what's the matter?! Is Elizabeth alright, has something happened to her or Georgie? Please tell me they are both well!"

Huntley, being the oldest of the three cousins, and more than a bit tired of playing peacemaker between his mother and his ridiculous cousin responded before Richard could even think of a response. "You should concern yourself less with the servant you hired to provide social companionship to *your sister* and tell us what in the world you were doing taking CAROLINE BINGLEY into your bed last night! Does not your paid bint keep you satisfied? Was it the excitement of potentially getting caught? Well now you will have to answer truthfully to all of the questions you have been avoiding this season."

Darcy blinked once. Then the stress of the past 9 months, combined with the particular stress of this past week and the stress of the morning fire came to a blinding rage against his cousin's disrespectful speech. Taking Huntley by the lapels of his riding coat, Darcy unleashed his stress.

"YOU WILL NEVER AGAIN SPEAK SO DISRESPECTFULLY OF MY WIFE! Elizabeth is rightfully the Mistress of my home and I will not have one word spoken against her, do you understand me?! I can take you apart bit by bit with a rapier and I certainly will not give you the

choice of weapon in a Gentlemen's duel the next time you unleash that acerbic tongue of yours against my wife. DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

Only Richard's superior training at hand to hand combat was able to take Darcy to the ground before the Fitzwilliam gentlemen provided quite the show for the gathered tenant farmers and Elisha Masters. "Darcy, now is not the time to brawl in the field like children. Elizabeth and Georgiana are fine, but my brother and I came here to take you back to Pemberley urgently. Miss Bingley was indeed found in your bed this morning, wearing naught by the bedclothes, and she means to trap you into marriage. Your valet has adamantly declared that you were not in your bed at all last night, but that will matter little to the Earls, who are most likely gathered at this moment to try and force you into some kind of action. If you are not married by the end of the day, I'm certain you shall be married by the end of the week. If you do not come with me post haste, you will likely have no say in the eventual bride."

The gravity of the situation finally penetrated Darcy's rage filled mind and he looked between his cousins taking a moment to calm his breathing. "Since I married Elizabeth by special license in the Pemberley Chapel last October with the blessing and consent of her guardian, Edward Gardiner, I am not at all worried about what marriage schemes might be brewing inside Pemberley's walls. It is more a matter of containing this scandal and finding some hole in which to hide Caroline Bingley for the rest of her natural life. She was in my bed you say? Unclothed? Perhaps an Irish nunnery will take her. At least the Catholics know what to do with unbalanced manipulative women."

Huntley and Richard looked at Darcy with nearly identical expressions of open mouthed shock. Huntley recovered first, "Did you say you married Miss Elizabeth *last October*?!"

"Yes, and we had our own reasons for keeping that information from being generally known outside a very select few persons. Today that secrecy ends. Someone must stay with Elisha and help get the family settled in a new dwelling. The tenant house is a total loss. At least it is summer and the rains have not yet started. Richard, I would prefer you accompany me back to Pemberley."

"Do not worry Darcy, I came specifically for the purpose of staying with the young Mr. Masters. I have no intention of returning to your house until well after the supper hour. I may even just ride back to

Matlock and hide in my rooms until mother's rage cools. Perhaps I shall see you again at Christmas, next year." With a final nod, Huntley strode away from Darcy and Richard to offer his assistance in relocating the unfortunate family whose entire lives had been destroyed by a fire.

Without another word, Darcy mounted his horse and headed for home with Richard close behind.

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Upon re-entering the house, Mrs. Reynolds was met with a barrage of reports from the various maids and footmen trying to contain the situation. Miss Bingley's outrageous behaviour was noted, but quickly dismissed as unimportant. Mrs. Darcy would handle her soon enough. That Mr. Darcy had returned not 5 minutes ago was very good news. Motioning to the new guest she had retrieved from the village to follow, Mrs. Reynolds climbed the main staircase to the Master's study.

Upon getting close to the mayhem, it became evident that Darcy's appearance had not settled the storm or brought any kind of order to the assembled Earls.

In fact, for the full 5 minutes that Darcy had been standing in the doorway to his own study, he had been able to say no more than 2 words and could only barely keep up with the myriad of voices calling for him to alternatively marry Caroline, don't marry Caroline, marry Lady such and such, or just tell them the truth (*wait, who knew the truth!*).

Mrs. Reynolds, with the help of 2 large footmen, was able to clear the door and make an entrance path for her guest. The elderly vicar of Pemberley parish walked into the study and in a clear voice accustomed to commanding the attention of men of wealth, called for the room to be silent.

Everyone in the room, from the Earls to the footmen carefully monitoring the situation in case anyone needed to be restrained, and the one Lady nearly forgotten with all of shouting going about, looked directly at the kindly man of God who had graced the Darcy family with his words of wisdom for nearly 40 years. Each man present had listened to his sermons at one point in their life, during summer holidays from school spent with friends, or during social calls that turned into weeklong visits. The old vicar commanded the respect the

cloth rightfully bestowed onto his person and took a moment to look each man of wealth and status in the eye before taking the massive book tucked under his arm to the center of Darcy's equally massive desk, behind which sat the Earl of Matlock who had been trying to command the room from the obvious place of power.

Silence finally reigned in the master's study where only moments ago there had been a cacophony of noise. Each and every man could hear the hearty paper rustle as the vicar opened the book to the current date then proceeded to go backwards, showing the Earl that each page was dutifully filled completely without even one line being left empty. When he came to the page detailing October 3, 1812 he merely stopped turning pages and allowed the Earl to read.

Just as Lord Matlock's eyes alighted on the line in the ancient book that stated Fitzwilliam George James Darcy had wed Elizabeth Francine Bennet by special license, the second shrill scream to reverberate against the halls of Pemberley that day rent the silence.

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Lady Sefton had figured it all out the second the vicar had ambled into the room carrying what could only be the church's official book of records. Combined with the mixture of relief and nervousness on Darcy's face, she was sure that Darcy and Elizabeth had been married since well before the London season had even started and they did not want to announce their marriage for some reason or another. There were certainly enough reasons abounding for such deception. His awful relations who may have tried to stop the union. Her father's death not yet a year in the past. The youngest Bennet's patched up affair with the officer and a baby. Georgiana's recent debut and the other Bennet sisters who have yet to secure husbands. The reasons mattered not to Lady Sefton.

At one time in her past, the Grand Lady was ashamed to admit, they would have mattered a great deal. Maria Margaret Craven had been brought up in the ton and raised very high through her marriage to William Philip Molyneux, the 2nd Earl of Sefton. The young child she had been when she married in 1792 thought that she had made the best match possible and was unabashed in her effusive boasting to anyone who would listen. Her husband-to-be was a personal friend of the Prince Regent after all.

Lady Sefton quickly learned exactly what it meant to be married to a close personal friend of the Prince Regent. Her husband was a

gambler, a spendthrift, a womanizer, and never looked upon her with any kindness. Though they had been married more than 20 years and she had given him 4 of his 10 (acknowledged) children, she had refused to even see him for the past 5 years. She lived most of her life in the London townhouse gifted to her by her grandmother through a series of marriage settlement bequests and spent her country time at the lovely estate of her grand-nephew Hurst. The revelations brought on by her very unhappy marriage changed Lady Sefton greatly.

In her middle-age, Lady Sefton kept mostly to herself and her family except when overseeing Almacks's. Lady Sefton always tried to temper the other patronesses when they were attempting to blackball some young lady or gentleman and never voted to revoke membership vouchers unless someone acted very badly towards another guest in the assembly. Needless to say, she had never voted to revoke a young lady's voucher, but was often the only voice admonishing the young men who take unwanted liberties with the women.

It was a particular pleasure of the grand Lady to watch the young people meeting and dancing away the night during the season, even more so when there was obvious affection between the courting couples. And it had always been overly obvious to Lady Sefton that there was an immense amount of affection between Fitzwilliam Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, now known to be Elizabeth Darcy.

Having experienced a marriage built exclusively on money, connections, and social selectiveness, Lady Sefton never wished such a life upon anyone. Even the ridiculous sister-in-law of Reginald Hurst.

Caroline Bingley was the worst kind of money grabbing, social climbing, gossiping harpy that London society had to offer. She was unkind and insincere, even to her siblings. But Lady Sefton knew Caroline was a product of the harsh English society which valued land ownership and a connection to nobility above the things that truly mattered. Well, the misguided sister of her grand-nephew by marriage was in for quite a shock and a very uncomfortable lesson in exactly how cruel the London elite could truly be.

Entering the yellow parlor she quickly took stock of the assembled Ladies, Elizabeth, Georgiana, and Bingley's sisters. One well-placed statement would put this whole thing to bed almost immediately. Coming to Elizabeth's side and taking her hand in a clear sign of respect, Lady Sefton did her part in launching the newly revealed Mrs. Darcy to her rightful place.

“My *dear* Mrs. Darcy, how wonderful it is to finally be free to acknowledge your position in company. I cannot tell you how lovely this house party has been, and so much excitement! You simply must let me tell you that I have not been so entertained in many years.”

Elizabeth quickly regained her composure after Lady Sefton’s greeting. Truthfully it came as no surprise that this lady, the highest and most grand person of their current company, was the one to break the news. Elizabeth had come to very much enjoy the older lady’s company in the past week, and they had both discovered a kindred spirit in the other. With a slight chuckle and a small shake of her head, Elizabeth thanked Lady Sefton for her kind words then offered her guest a place at the table and called for a fresh tea pot to be brought to the table.

Lady Fiona Finch was the first to find her tongue. “What do you *mean* calling this *servant* by the name ‘Mrs. Darcy’?”

Lady Sefton settled herself in her chair with more care than was strictly necessary and smoothed out the creases in her morning dress before looking up at the young woman and answering with all of the superior air of a Countess of the highest rank. “What I mean, Lady Fiona, is that Mr. Darcy wed the lovely Miss Elizabeth Bennet ages ago by special license here in Pemberley’s chapel and I for one am glad that they have finally decided to announce their marriage publically. In fact, the vicar is in the study with all of the men right now with the parish records book to testify to the fact of their marriage.” A quick decision made, Lady Sefton decided to play as if she had known all along in order to quell as much argument as possible. “Of course, those of us who knew respected their request for privacy. With the unfortunate death of her dear father it could have been a scandal if the *ton* knew how quickly they married. But of course it is no crime and with five unmarried sisters, I believe it was noble of Mr. Darcy to help his intended’s family in their time of great need and mourning.”

A small, but shrill noise drew all eyes toward Caroline Bingley at the head of the table. Upon Lady Sefton’s entrance, Caroline had been excited to see her sister’s great-Aunt-in-law. To Caroline, Lady Sefton was one more person come to witness her triumph. After the Lady’s declaration that Eliza Bennet was Mrs. Darcy, all of the color began to drain from Caroline’s face. The revelation that Lady Sefton believed they were married jarred Caroline’s confidence and at the Lady’s recounting of the Pemberley vicar with his records book, a crushing weight began to settle in Caroline’s stomach. All of that fear turned to rage upon looking back to Eliza. She looked much too content, almost

relieved, at the old Lady's words. And there was a particular sparkle in her eyes that Caroline had always absolutely loathed.

Caroline began to turn an unhealthy shade of purple then screamed with all her might and lunged at Elizabeth.

Chapter 30: Some Number of Weddings and a (belated) Funeral

Chapter Summary

Finale

Chapter Notes

This is it. The final chapter and the end to 18 months of writing. Thank you again for so much support and all of the great comments. I've very much enjoyed this activity and perhaps I will find another story to tell.

Pemberley, Derbyshire

20 August 1813

Mrs. Reynolds was sitting in her office very early in the morning putting the finishing lines on a sizeable order for the Lambton butcher before tomorrow's wedding breakfast. The triple wedding of Miss Jane Bennet to Mr. Charles Bingley, Miss Mary Bennet to Lord Bristol, and Mrs. Lydia Wickham to Mr. Malcom Fitzwilliam was going to be a joyous event! Tonight the Darcy's were hosting a formal dinner with some dancing for all of the assembled family and friends. Then, tomorrow at 11am, the Pemberley parish church would be filled to capacity with all of the well-wishers. While the family came back to Pemberley for the wedding breakfast, the assembly hall in Lambton was going to host a large event for all of the Darcys' tenants and the surrounding community members. Mr. Darcy had insisted on observing all of the expected celebrations upon the marriage of his wife's sisters as if they had each been born a Darcy.

The celebrations were a welcome change from the mood of the past few weeks.

Pemberley's inhabitants had a very somber 5 days leading up to the one year anniversary of the death of Mr. Bennet. All of the Bennet women and their close relations had observed a full 5 days of remembrance for Mr. Bennet, including daily services in the Pemberley family chapel and no formal entertaining. Though Mr. Bennet had not, in his whole life, set foot inside Derbyshire County and certainly not on the Pemberley estate, each of the Darcys' tenants paid their respects to the Mistress out of genuine affection and respect

for the woman they served and her family. On 14 August 1813, Mrs. Bennet put away her mourning clothes, donned her widows cap, and come to breakfast in a sweet yellow day dress. The dinner party held that night was certainly not the liveliest seen at Pemberley in recent months, but it was a nice evening with some lovely entertainment by all of the young ladies in residence and much welcomed by the Bennet family.

Mrs. Reynolds put down her quill, sprinkled a handful of sand over her paper and stood to attend to the day's duties. Before leaving her office, the kindly old lady, who had lived at Pemberley all her life and served the family as their housekeeper for nearly 25 years, performed her new routine, adopted in the wake of the "Caroline Bingley Incident." Since discovering that Caroline's maid had forced her way into Mrs. Reynolds's office for the purpose of stealing the spare family wing master key out of the key-box, Mrs. Reynolds had begun checking that the key-box was appropriately full each and every time she either entered or left her office. After checking the box and locking the office door, Mrs. Reynolds spared a thought for that poor, stupid young woman then shook her head and went about her duties for the day.

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## ***Pemberley, Derbyshire***

### ***18 June 1813 – Just past the Breakfast Hour***

Two footmen who had been attending the breakfasting ladies dashed to the table in order to restrain Caroline Bingley from laying one hand on their Mistress. A third footman went to Louisa Hurst who had become much too lightheaded in the wake of Lady Sefton's revelation regarding Mr. Darcy's marriage. Thankfully the excellent Pemberley staff were trained in how to manage a fainting lady. Both Caroline and Louisa were taken to their rooms, forcibly in the case of Caroline, and kept there until Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley could provide specific instructions. Caroline's temper had reached such a level that 4 footmen were required to guard the doors leading from her rooms. All of the way from the yellow parlor to the guest wing she had been screaming about the treatment of the servants in what was surely soon to be *HER HOUSE*, profusely declaring that it simply could not be true that Mr. Darcy was already married to the *LOW-BORN CHIT*, and demanding to be brought to Mr. Darcy and her brother *AT ONCE*!

While everyone inside the manor walls was more than able to hear

her, not one person gave her any mind.

All of the assembled ladies sat silently in their chairs until the irate woman was dragged out of sight and the door to the parlor was firmly shut by the butler in an attempt to lessen the noise still coming from the hall. No one moved, or even blinked, for what seemed like an eternity to Elizabeth.

Finally, Lady Matlock broke the silence. “My dear Georgiana, I do not believe that I have been properly acquainted with your new sister. Would you do me the honor of an introduction?”

As shocked as both Elizabeth and Georgiana were at the civility and presumed acceptance of the words spoken by Darcy’s illustrious aunt, Georgiana readily jumped at the opportunity to formally introduce Mrs. Elizabeth Francine Darcy, neé Bennet, formerly of the Longbourn Estate in Hertfordshire and daughter to the deceased Mr. Thomas Bennet, Esq., to the women at the table. Following the example of Lady Matlock, all of the other noble Ladies swallowed their pride and also requested an introduction. Even Lady Fiona and Lady Grace decided it was in their immediate best interest to bite their tongues, at least until their fathers and brothers could be interrogated.

All of the commotion caused by Caroline Bingley’s removal from the yellow parlor had the men in the Master’s study dashing down the hall towards the women. Darcy was the first to reach the doors to the room containing his family and the female guests. He flung open the door just as Georgiana was completing the formal introductions requested and barreled into the room, still looking an absolute freight in his sooty and singed work clothes with smoke smudges across his face and hands.

The sudden appearance of her husband in such a state startled Elizabeth and she rose from her chair in such haste that she knocked it down onto its back. “William! What in the world .....

Elizabeth’s exclamation was cut short as all of the blood in her head was unable to travel with her rapid ascent and the Mistress of Pemberley promptly fainted. Once again, it was necessary for the footmen to call upon their excellent training and Elizabeth Darcy was swept into the arms of the nearest waiting servant and laid on the bed in the Mistresses chambers before she could fully come back to herself.

The hours between breakfast and dinner passed in a blur for most of

Pemberley's guests. The Earls of Matlock, Nottingham, and Derby each decided to follow the Darcys' upstairs and requested that their wives and daughters attend them in their rooms. The Dowager Countess of Bristol requested her son attend her to her rooms and Lady Grace followed on the heels of her mother and brother in order to start her inquisition, leaving only Georgiana and Lady Sefton at the table.

In the weeks following the incident, no one would be able to accurately describe exactly how it had happened, but by dinner time, all of the assembled Earls had decided that the best thing was to support Darcy and his wife, and each ordered his family to get in line or skip the next London Season. The wealth of Pemberley was just too great to be shunned, and each had too intimate a connection to the Darcy family (or dearly wished for a much greater connection shortly) to escape all ridicule if any of the events of today reached the gossip mongers of the *ton*. To Elizabeth's absolute amazement, all of her guests (except a few who were newly departed for the north) appeared at the appointed dinner hour, dressed in their finery, and proceeded to treat Elizabeth with the respect due the Mistress of Pemberley and their hostess. That evening, Elizabeth and William sat at opposite ends of their large dining table and entertained their guests with good humor and no small measure of private joy.

While the Earls had been handling their irate wives and petulant daughters, William and Elizabeth had consulted with the Darcys' Lambton physician concerning Elizabeth's troubling symptoms and recent fainting spell. Mrs. Reynolds had taken the liberty of calling the doctor after her mistress fainted and believed that the halls of Pemberley were shortly to be filled with the pitter-patter of little feet. After the family's return from Town, Mrs. Reynolds noticed a few pointed changes in Elizabeth's food preferences. Though previously Mrs. Reynolds had never seen Elizabeth eat more than a few bites of sugared cakes, much preferring Cook's tart lemon bars, in the last week the Mistress of Pemberley had more than once chosen and consumed a whole slice of cake with powdered sugar frosting and actually turned her nose at the dish yesterday when presented with a lemon bar after luncheon. Additionally, Elizabeth had not once eaten her formerly favorite dressed potatoes with the lemon-dill salad cream though Cook had included them at three different meals with the purpose of pleasing her Mistress.

Combined with her constant tiredness of the last few days and the morning's fainting spell, Mrs. Reynolds was fairly certain Elizabeth Darcy was with child.

The doctor also concluded as much and told Mr. and Mrs. Darcy that he expected them to welcome a new addition to the house about the first week of February, but of course nothing was certain until the babe quickened sometime in the next 6 to 8 weeks. He also relayed that the fainting spell was perfectly normal for a newly pregnant woman who was overtaxing herself and to avoid strenuous activity for a while. The knowledge that his pregnant wife had fainted from overtaxing herself sent Fitzwilliam Darcy into a massive worry. He was convinced that they needed to dismiss all of their guests at once and place Elizabeth on bed rest immediately. Thankfully Mrs. Reynolds and the doctor were able to disabuse him of those plans before he informed Elizabeth, who was napping peacefully in her bed, of his exaggerated reaction.

The final resolution to all of the heartache of the day came before Mrs. Reynolds could show the good doctor back to his waiting curriicle. Caroline Bingley had been shoved into Bingley's carriage in the company of Louisa and Reginald Hurst and sent on her way to an estate near Carlisle in the far north of England owned by one of Hurst's' cousins (on the non-Sefton side of the family) who never came to London. Reginald Hurst had spent too many years living in a house filled with Caroline's spies and believing that Charles would be of no use to him in exerting any power or control over his wife's sister. A great many days since his marriage had seen Hurst escaping into alcohol to drown out Caroline's incessant gossip and demands. This morning he had been woken from his alcohol induced heavy sleep by his wife quite early in a state of panic. After finally being able to derive meaning from Louisa's hysterical speech, Hurst had rushed to the Master's study to try and stop a travesty from befalling Darcy, whom Hurst had always rather liked. Hurst was as amazed as his Great-Aunt to witness Charles Bingley's assertiveness with the Earls and overly grateful that his brother-in-law was not so blind to Caroline's wicked nature as he had originally thought. After the arrival of the elderly Pemberley vicar and his records book, Hurst had again mirrored his Great-Aunt's thoughts, this time regarding Darcy's current marital status, and he immediately left to see to the removal of his family party from Pemberley.

Informing the Pemberley staff to have their trunks sent along at a later date after there was time to attend to the packing, Hurst ordered Bingley's carriage to depart as soon as possible. A small valise each was packed for Caroline, Louisa, and Hurst, then the three left without taking any formal leave of their hosts or the other guests. Hurst and Charles had managed a rushed conversation regarding how to handle Caroline's ruination, then Charles Bingley relinquished all

responsibility for his grandfather's favorite.

Caroline was given exactly 2 choices, marry the first man with whom Hurst could contract and Charles would give the full £20,000 of her dowry to her new husband or establish herself with what was left of her inheritance (considerably LESS than £20,000). Charles would never give Caroline one additional farthing. The small fortune she had spent on clothes for the Season would suffice as her wedding trousseau and Caroline was henceforth never to step foot in one of Charles Bingley's or Reginald Hurst's homes ever again. While Louisa visited her sister at least once a year and Charles and Jane managed to visit Caroline every few years, more due to Jane's forgiving and kind nature than any familial affection from Charles, no other person at Pemberley that day every heard from or saw Caroline Bingley again.

The remainder of the Darcys' summer house party was an amazing success. Elizabeth had been sure that their noble guests would leave Pemberley before the day was done and never again acknowledge any of her family in public. When not a single guest followed the Bingley carriage down the lane, Elizabeth was fearful of the kind of atmosphere which would penetrate the party, not scheduled to end for another 8 days. Thankfully, any awkwardness from the revelation of William and Elizabeth's marriage was put aside during that first dinner. Elizabeth was altogether too fond of laughing at the folly of the world to really hold a grudge against the women who had previously treated her with such little respect and all of the ladies had relented to their husbands', fathers', and brothers' demands. Besides, the Darcys really had put on a fabulous holiday and everyone was looking forward to the final week's scheduled entertainments, so why ruin a good holiday with a few dashed hopes.

As conversations of such an intimate nature were highly irregular amongst the upper set, only Lady Matlock ever directly addressed an apology to Elizabeth. On the morning of the second day following *the incident*, Lady Matlock had requested a private interview with both Elizabeth and William after breakfast. For the first time since he had gone away to school and was expected to behave as a man, William felt as if he were again speaking to his loving Aunt Josie instead of the great Countess of Matlock.

Josephine Fitzwilliam apologized for her prior treatment of Elizabeth and her interference in William's private dealings. She revealed that she had been feeling pressure from her sister-in-law to secure Lady Fiona the match she desperately desired and the added stress of her own children's continued unwed states was beginning to take a toll on

her poor nerves. Elizabeth nearly spat her tea all over Lady Matlock upon hearing her mother's favored expression come out of the grand Lady's mouth. First her Aunt Gardiner and now Lady Matlock had exhibited ridiculous and hurtful behaviour in the face of a perceived responsibility to secure marital felicity for five young people. Perhaps her mother was not so absurd after all.

Lady Fiona and Lady Grace were the only two guests that never quite regained their full enjoyment of the entertainments. With now five failed seasons behind her, Lady Fiona was feeling all of the desperation and pressure of an old maid. Truthfully, her aunt's connection to Fitzwilliam Darcy had been her last hope of catching a young man with a proper estate. Her father had given her until her 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday to choose a man of her own before he contracted for her marriage to his friend, the old, fat, and generally unappealing Earl of Southwark, who was looking for a replacement to his first wife who died birthing his 3<sup>rd</sup> daughter. With that day coming shortly after the New Year, Lady Fiona would have to beg her youngest brother to let her stay with him in London all winter so as to attend every single society event between now and her birthday with the hope of finding someone more appealing.

Lady Grace was less disappointed at missing out on Darcy's person than on missing out on his pocket book. Grace Hervey was actually quite intelligent and since her encounter with Mrs. Gardiner in the Darcy drawing room earlier this summer, she had asked her brother to educate her on the economics of their estate, under the guise of learning the economics of running a household. Since her father and oldest brother's death, Lady Grace had noticed that her mother had been purchasing more sundry and Goodwin had increased her annual allowance for clothing, but she didn't readily understand that it was her brother's foray into mercantile investment that had yielded the additional income. Seeing, for the first time, the amount of money required to run an estate and the taxes levied by the crown on their titled lands had convinced Lady Grace that Mr. Darcy was the perfect choice of a husband, untitled and diversified.

Additionally, after hearing of her brother's intention to court and marry the younger sister of Mr. Darcy's wife, Lady Grace was exceedingly worried that she would be sent to live in the Dower House with her mother considering her exceptionally rude and demeaning treatment of the future Countess's sister. Much to Lady Grace's confusion and relief, she found Mary Bennet and Elizabeth Darcy to be kind and forgiving.

The crowning jewel to the summer was a fabulous ball on the final night of the Darcys' house party which included the assembled guests as well as all of the prominent Derbyshire families. William was overjoyed to be able to introduce his wife to the quality gentry in the area. Elizabeth donned her wedding costume for the first time since the day they were married and welcomed her guests with all the splendor that Pemberley had to offer.

Since their marriage was no longer a secret from society, Darcy decided that as many members of their respective families as could make the trip in time should also be in attendance for Elizabeth's grand debut as the Mistress of Pemberley. He had sent several express invitations to the Gardiners, the Phillipses, and Lydia Wickham.

Lydia, Thomas, and the Scarborough Fitzwilliams arrived mid-day on June 21<sup>st</sup> with plenty of time to help Elizabeth with the final preparations and become acquainted with the other assembled house guests. Lydia had been so excited for her tour of the Lakes that she had sent a full itinerary of their trip in her last letter to Lizzie, including the names of the inns where the Fitzwilliams planned to stay. Darcy sent an express to the inn where the Fitzwilliams were planning to stay in Harrogate on the second and 3<sup>rd</sup> night of their trip asking his Great-Aunt to divert their plans and come to Pemberley. Everyone agreed that they would very much like to attend Pemberley's grand ball and that their tour could commence after a few days visit.

While business prevented Mr. Phillips from being able to make it to Derbyshire by June 25<sup>th</sup>, the Gardiners packed just enough clothing for the trip and their formal ball attire then set off less than 2 hours after opening the invitation. Additional items for their planned holiday in Derbyshire had been packed and sent along behind the family.

The whole evening had been an unqualified success!

Everyone in attendance had been wooed by the new Mrs. Darcy, and more than one person mentioned out loud that they had never seen Mr. Darcy in such a grand mood or dance so many sets. The first half of the evening was fully dedicated to reveling in the hostess's uncommon skills and her twinkling laughter.

At supper, the Darcys had decided that it was too wonderful of a night and such a grand occasion deserved even more felicity. So, just before the dessert was to be set out, Darcy called for a round of Champaign,

then raised his glass to toast the engagements of his wife's three sisters. Just the day before the ball, Charles Bingley, Goodwin Hervey, and Malcolm Fitzwilliam had each come asking for formal permission to marry Jane, Mary, and Lydia from Edward Gardner before he had been in the house above an hour. Bernard Finch, the only solicitor in residence, drew up the settlement papers and had the marriage contracts signed before the majority of the house guests left the day following the ball.

Georgiana and Bernard Finch had also come to their own understanding in the days leading up to the ball, but since Bernard was not in a position to marry for another year or so, they decided to enter into an extended courtship instead of a formal engagement as of yet. Darcy was glad that his sister was going to be well matched, but also very glad not to be losing her quite yet.

It was a night that none of the assembled members of Fitzwilliam and Elizabeth Darcy's families would ever forget.

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Pemberley, Derbyshire

21 August 1813

Over the past 5 days, Pemberley Manor had been slowing filling to capacity with all of the expected wedding guests from nearly every county in the whole of England and a few from Scotland. Lady Sefton had been overjoyed at the engagement between Charles and Jane and declared that she wanted nothing better than to attend the wedding and perform the duties as the representative from the groom's family. Since Charles had no family other than Caroline and Louisa, and neither was going to be able to attend his wedding, Lady Sefton had declared herself Charles Bingley's closest relation, and no one even thought to argue with her. In the 9 weeks since that ridiculous day Caroline Bingley had been found in Mr. Darcy's bed and the truth of the Darcys marriage had been revealed, Lady Sefton enjoyed a leisurely tour of the Peaks and Lake District, then returned to Pemberley in time to assist with the final preparations. The Dowager Bristol, Lady Grace, Geoffrey and Josephine Fitzwilliam, and the Gardiners joined Lady Sefton for a portion of her trip and each of the traveling companions felt no small amount of joy at the increase in their family circle that was in the immediate near future.

A very welcome surprise guest had been Charlotte Collins, née Lucas.

Charlotte rolled up in a fine carriage with the Fitzwilliam Crest on the side on 15 August and alighted with Lady Gwyneth, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam, Bernard Finch, and her young sister, Miss Maria Lucas. A fortnight before, Lady Gwyneth and Richard had left Pemberley on some business in London. Elizabeth had never gotten the details, but since she was overly busy with preparations for the wedding, she was not concerned with their trip. In truth, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Charles Bingley, Lord Bristol, and Malcom Fitzwilliam had sent Colonel Fitzwilliam and Lady Gwyneth to Bernard Finch's law firm in London in order to renew the male line entailment on Longbourn for the next generation. Lydia's son, Thomas, was legally the closest male issue to Mr. Thomas Bennet and in the event Mr. and Mrs. Collins never had a male child, Thomas should be the next in line to inherit. Darcy, Bingley, Bristol, and Malcolm, being the husband and fiancés of Mr. Bennet's daughters, had legal standing to insist that their children be in line to inherit Longbourn.

Upon calling on the Collinses in order to present them with the entailment renewal notice, Charlotte Collins decided she very much wished to see her particular friend and witness the joyous wedding of the three Bennet sisters. Mr. Collins had been adamant that he would not go because the truth of Darcy's marriage to Elizabeth had upset Lady Catherine very much and she had advised Collins to cut off all communication with the Bennets and the Darcys immediately. He was not temperate in his abuse of all of the former ladies of Longbourn and Elizabeth in particular.

Though Charlotte Collins did not regret her marriage, she was tired of her husband's idiocy. She told him in no uncertain terms that she would be traveling to Pemberley for the wedding and staying for a nice long holiday with her particular friend. She did not anticipate returning to Longbourn for at least two months complete. The last thing Charlotte left behind were words for her husband to seriously consider over the length of her absence, "I know that you shall always commiserate and console Lady Catherine as well as you can, but I believe we should stand by the nephew. He has infinitely more to give."

On the day Mrs. Bennet gave away three of her daughter to men of quality and money she was ever the same as she had always been. It would be a good ending, and a happy thing for the sake of her family, if the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life, but such fundamental changes in one's character are very rarely seen in

reality. Though Francine Bennet and her sister Phillips stood too much in awe of Pemberley and its Master to speak with much familiarity, whenever they did speak, it must be vulgar.

There was also much wailing and scolding of Elizabeth for her secrecy regarding her marriage. She complained constantly that Elizabeth could have saved her much heartache if only her marriage had been widely known and that Elizabeth should have given Jane and Mary much more elevation in society during the Season and that Kitty should have been invited to stay with them in London and paraded around the dance halls with Miss Darcy. Every day there was some new complaint about how Elizabeth had been selfish and unsympathetic to the plight her family lived. Though the Darcys had been supporting all of the Bennet women by sending money to Edward Gardiner through the guise of Elizabeth's supposed salary, had often entertained Jane and Mary during the Season in London, and obviously it was through the connection with the Darcys that Mary had come to meet Lord Bristol, Francine Bennet still had many words of remonstrance for her least favorite daughter.

One afternoon about 2 weeks before the scheduled wedding, Darcy found Elizabeth silently crying behind the locked door of the Mistress's study. He had gone looking for her after overhearing a particularly hurtful tirade Mrs. Bennet delivered upon finding Elizabeth in her favorite chair in the Library reading one of her father's old books. She lamented that the Mistress of such a fine estate could not be lounging around in the afternoon with a book and what would her husband say if he found her in such a repose! She would never make him happy and surely such a fine gentleman would dismiss her and take up with someone more appropriate in London if she did not immediately put away her father's foolishness and attend to something more productive.

The ignorant and spiteful things his mother-in-law said, especially to his beautiful wife, had always greatly offended Darcy. But finding his pregnant wife crying in the afternoon over such ridiculous words was the final straw. Darcy called for Edward Gardiner and Hamilton Phillips to his study immediately to discuss the defects in Mrs. Bennet's behaviour. It was generally agreed that Edward would take a firm hand with his sister and ensure that she did not further upset Elizabeth. It was also agreed that they needed to discuss a more permanent living situation for Mrs. Bennet.

With only Catherine Bennet left to marry, Darcy offered to allow the final unwed Bennet sister to come into his household permanently.

From what he had seen of Catherine in the weeks since the Bennets arrival, she was a much improved young woman willing to take direction on her conduct. Darcy believed that with a little time, she would be as much sought after as Elizabeth or Jane. All of the men agreed that between Gardiner, Phillips and Mrs. Bennet's £5,000 settlement, they could easily establish the widow in a small, but clean, home near the Meryton town lawn which Phillips new to be for sale. With her own establishment, all parties felt like a modicum of family felicity could be reached.

While Francine Bennet was not at all happy about being given a lecture from her brother about her behaviour toward one of her daughters, the threat of Mr. Darcy throwing her out of his home if she made his wife cry again was enough to curb the worst of her sharp tongue. Also, the prospect of having her own home again was very appealing. So it finally came to pass that all of the inhabitants of Pemberley were able to remain civil through the blessed day joining Jane, Mary, and Lydia to Charles, Goodwin, and Malcolm.

Long after all of the fairy cakes had been eaten and the three grand coaches carrying the newlywed couples had strolled down the lane towards wedding trips which would take the sisters all across the whole of England and Mary and Goodwin to the southern coast of Spain, Elizabeth and Darcy lay in their bed in a comfortable, loving repose.

"Did you see the announcement in the London paper regarding Lady Grace and Mr. Tannerbaugh?"

"No, of course not. You know I detest the society pages and never pay attention to the announcements. Whatever is that woman, daughter and sister to an Earl, who hounded me relentlessly, doing with a man from trade!?"

Elizabeth chuckled at her husband's stony face and raised voice. "I know you still would prefer to run the man through with that beautiful sword of your grandfather's for the slap he delivered to my person, but remember, he was once your good friend and is also well known to Lord Bristol. After her unsuccessful hounding here in the north, Lady Grace decided to settle for lots of money and a newly purchased estate in the south. Mary had mentioned something of it to me, that Lord Bristol helped Mr. Tannerbaugh purchase an estate he had been eying for some time, though the previous owner was not keen to sell to a tradesman. I gleaned from Mary that the status and support of the Earl of Bristol swayed the recalcitrant man into

accepting Mr. Tannerbaugh's offer. It is apparently a very lovely estate with a good annual income and at least 4 tenancies. With his continued investments in his father's trade business and the income from the land, Mr. Tannerbaugh and Lady Grace should be very well off indeed. He already has a house in town and she is a daughter of Bristol. Society will not shun them."

"Yes well," Darcy sniffed, "I'm relieved that they shall be well matched and far away from either of us for most of the year."

"There is one more piece of correspondence of which I would speak to you, if you would hear it."

"If you are speaking of my aunt, I will not! She will not be recognized by me again until she renders a full apology for the hurtful things she has said to you and about you to those of her acquaintance who would hear it. It was her own fault for spending a small fortune on those wedding announcement for myself and Anne and arranging for a wedding at the end of July without even so much as a by your leave. Stupid ridiculous woman! If she feels abandoned by our family or humiliated in Society, it was of her own making, that is for sure!"

"William, please. I know you are terribly upset by Lady Catherine's hurtful words and unfair expectations, but this missive is one you should perhaps read for yourself." Elizabeth took a folded letter out of a book on her nightstand and handed it to her husband.

After several minutes of pursuing the contents, Fitzwilliam Darcy sighed a heavy breath, rolled to his side and pulled the servant's cord for his valet. A few moments later brought Connor's knock upon the bedchamber door and the Darcys bid him entrance.

"My man, we've had news today that my cousin, Miss Anne de Bourgh, is set to marry Captain Thurston Finch, the second son of Lord Nottingham, at the Church of Sts. Peter and Paul in Kent County in less than 2 weeks' time. We shall need to be ready to depart for London as soon as the last of our own wedding guests leave in 2 days. Please start the preparations for our departure in the morning and find something for me to wear that is not so heavy around the collar. The temperature will undoubtedly be unbearable in Kent this time of year and the coat I wore today will not do at all. Thank you."

Another giggle escaped his wife as soon as Connor Grayson shut the door. Darcy arched one eyebrow at her in an attempted imitation of his favorite expression of hers, which only increased Elizabeth's

giggles to full on gales of laughter. “Perhaps,” she said through large gulps of air, “we should purchase you a few more formal morning suits in a variety of fabrics and colors. With all of the marital felicity going around, it would not do to have you appear at each function wearing the same coat. Just think of the gossip such a travesty would inspire! Our reputation would surely never survive.”

The only reply to such joyful silliness was for William Darcy to remove his wife’s mirthful smirk with a firm kiss which spoke to exactly the amount of marital felicity which would be enjoyed in the Master’s bedchamber of Pemberley for many years yet to come.

The End

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Here's an epilogue that wouldn't leave me alone. Thanks again for all of the wonderful encouragement on this story. Enjoy my imagination of the lives of our favorite sisters nearly twenty years later.

May 6, 1832 – Debut Ball for Miss Ann Darcy

Darcy House, Mayfair, London

Elizabeth Darcy took one last turn through the ballroom at Darcy House in London to ensure that everything was prepared to her exact instructions before retiring above stairs to dress for the night's festivities. Normally, Elizabeth would have left her servants and uncommonly proficient housekeeper alone in their preparations on the day of a ball, but tonight was not just any ball. Tonight was her oldest child's official debut and the announcement of her engagement.

Anne Jane Josephine Darcy had been born to Elizabeth and Fitzwilliam Darcy on February 6, 1814, to much delight and fanfare by both families. She was followed quickly by her younger sister, Georgiana Elizabeth Francine Darcy not two years later and finally the Darcys had welcomed their son and heir, Edward George Thomas Darcy, after another four years. Edward had inherited his father's looks but his mother's inclination for impertinence. At only 12 years of age he was already the most well-read of any of the Darcy children and a master of the single eyebrow quirk which was often the only indication that the young man was about to display his wry sense of humor upon some poor unsuspecting acquaintance. Anne Darcy greatly favored her mother in looks but was a miniature version of her mother's favorite and most serene sister, Jane Bingley, in temperament. Anne was always cheerful, unfailingly kind, and had a truly good heart which was loathe to speak ill of anyone. The oldest and most responsible of the Darcy siblings, and second oldest of all of her various cousins, Anne had been as much a mother hen as any of the actual mothers some days and was absolutely adored by all of her younger siblings and cousins. Finally, Georgiana Darcy took much of her coloring from her father's Fitzwilliam side of the family with fair hair and pale skin. She was also a studious master of the pianoforte and harp which she began to learn at a young age from her namesake, Aunt Georgiana Finch (néé Darcy), and her mother's sister, Aunt Mary,

the Countess of Bristol.

Tonight all of the Darcy's extended family and friends would be coming to celebrate Anne Darcy's coming out and the much anticipated engagement of Anne to her second cousin, Thurston Antony George Finch, II. Thurston is the oldest son of Lord Captain Thurston Finch (retired) and Anne Finch (née de Bourgh). He is set to inherit the estate of Rosings Park upon the death of his father and this marriage fulfills a great wish on the part of the young man's grandmother, Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The matriarch of the de Bourgh family, who is the maternal aunt of Fitzwilliam Darcy, wished greatly for her daughter to marry her nephew and combine the Pemberley and Rosings estates. Nineteen years ago, Lady Catherine was sorely disappointed when her wish was unfulfilled and her nephew married Elizabeth Bennet instead. Now, at the joining of the Darcy and de Bourgh line (which she still insists should retain top billing as her daughter was the heiress who inherited Rosings Park estate from the late Sir Louis de Bourgh and it was only put under the legal ownership of the Finch family name upon Captain Finch's marriage to Anne de Bourgh) Lady Catherine insists that it was her intention all along to have Fitzwilliam Darcy's child marry her own grandchild, even before the current bride and groom were born.

In reality, Lady Catherine had nothing to do with the match as the 2 cousins fell in love as children when visiting with family and begged their parents for a contract. The fathers both agreed that no contract would be signed as neither was particularly fond of the old practice of arranging the younger generation's marriages before the primary parties could legally consent and therefore jointly decreed that, while they would acknowledge the wishes of their children, any marriage could not take place until Anne had at least one season and Thurston completed his first year at college. Now, in the middle of Anne's debut season, the fathers capitulated slightly and agreed to announce the engagement at Miss Anne Darcy's formal debut ball thus allowing the couple to enjoy the remaining delights of this season as acknowledged affianced persons. Darcy was reluctant at first, wanting his daughter to have the enjoyment of her first season without having to consider her fiancé's feelings on entertainments or invitations, but then three young men came calling on Anne the week following her appearance at an early ball given by his cousin Matlock, and one actually approached him for a formal courtship after having been in company with his daughter for only one dinner party. Anne was so upset that she could not politely turn away such unwanted attention with the truth of her understanding that Elizabeth Darcy had overridden her husband and insisted that the engagement be made official before her

daughter could be made to have to face the expectations of any more young men.

Elizabeth had some experience in this arena having had to conceal her own marriage during the 1813 London Season. One incident had involved a young gentleman with such unjustifiable expectations of marrying Elizabeth for social gain that upon her declaration that she was not inclined to marry him, the young man had actually slapped her across the face. Though no one really expected any situation remotely close to the one with Elizabeth and her unwanted suitor to arise for Anne Darcy, it was enough of a reminder of the stress of the London marriage mart to convince her father to announce the engagement ahead of the originally planned event at the very end of the season in July.

“My Dear Mrs. Darcy, how wonderful you look. I’m sure you shall shine as brightly as our daughter this evening in the glittering candle light of the ball room. Perhaps I should keep you locked away up here so that none of the new pups on the marriage mart get any untoward ideas.”

Elizabeth Darcy laughed at her husband. While his jealousy had declined over the many years they had shared, it was only by a little. “I am sure that no one will be making any advances at me while there will be so many young, handsome, unattached ladies about. I am sure I will be too tied up all night making introductions for our nieces and nephews to even dance one dance.”

“Hopefully you will save one dance for me, my love.”

“You shall always have all of my dances.”

Darcy took his wife’s hand and led her towards the main staircase. “I must say dear, I never dreamed all those years ago that we would be here now, with so many of our sisters and their children enjoying London and society. When I first came across you in distress in the Lambton Inn, reading Jane’s account of Lydia’s elopement with Wickham, I was sure that my life was ruined. Now see where we are. Nearly 20 years later and no one even remembers that you once tried to pass as my sister’s companion or that Lydia’s son was born to a different father than Malcom. The only sadness is that your esteemed father is not still with us to enjoy his grandchildren or the exalted position of your sisters.”

“You are right that it seemed unlikely at the time, but assuredly Lady

Catherine still remembers all of those missteps. She is a woman of uncommon sense and understanding. Just ask her.” Darcy snorted and did not even try to contradict Elizabeth’s description of his esteemed aunt who was determined to continue pestering them all well into her seventh decade. Before any more was required of the conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Darcy, they walked into the front parlor, already full of their family and closest friends waiting the arrival of the best of London Society for Miss Darcy’s official debut.

Jane and Charles Bingley along with their eldest son were present for this most anticipated engagement party. Though they rarely enjoyed the season in town, they were never outright shunned, mostly because Jane’s sisters, the esteemed Mrs. Darcy and Lady Bristol would not have allowed it. The Bingleys kept a house in Town, but spent the majority of their time at their estate in the peaks district. After purchasing his estate and bringing his new bride home, the Bingley’s produced 4 children and continued to expand the Bingley business enterprise.

With the help of Darcy, Lord Bristol, and the Scarborough Fitzwilliams, Bingley expanded his mill businesses as well as his land holdings. The wool and clothing factories each at least tripled in output since 1813 and the profits from the expansions have been astounding. In addition to providing work and income for a large number of families in Derbyshire and Yorkshire, the Bingley factories also ensured safe working conditions for children as well as at least 2 hours per day in educational instruction. Every child was taught to read, do sums and at least one finishing skill such as sewing clothing, wood working or construction. Bingley hoped that every child who had to work in order to help feed his or her family would come away with enough education to at least make foreman's pay as an adult and therefore not have to send their own children into mills. He wanted to stop the cycle of poverty which had driven his own grandfather and sister to act deplorably.

Soon after opening the second Yorkshire clothing mill, Lydia convinced Bingley to start making and distributing certain pieces of ready to wear clothing, which were becoming popular among men's fashion and middle –class and working class women. She also convinced Bingley to send the children to the clothing making shop instead of the mills as a safer alternative to running the large milling machines. Lydia herself taught many of the children how to make workable and sturdy clothing until she left with her husband for a new position as the Bishop of Bristol in 1818. Thereafter Lydia would come back to Scarborough a few times each year to visit her husband's

family and provide new designs for the clothing based on fashionable trends. While certainly ahead of the times for the London *ton*, the ready to wear clothing was extremely popular in Scarborough, Nottingham, York, Leeds, Manchester, and Scotland. Several clothiers and tailors in the northern cities would fight to get as large an order as possible every year.

Lord and Lady Bristol (still Mary and Goodwin to their friends and family) enjoyed a happy, if quiet, marriage. After seeing Lady Grace married to Mr. Andrew Tannerbaugh and moved into her own home, more than 50 miles from the earl's estate seat, Mary and Goodwin produced three sons in quick succession. The oldest having just finished his first year at Cambridge with his best friend, Thurston Finch II. Though Mary and Anne Finch (née de Bourgh) had not formed a close relationship before their marriages, their shared close connection to the Darcys and the longstanding friendship between their husbands meant many shared summers trips to Pemberley and winter celebrations spent together.

Anne and Thurston Finch were generally happy to escape Rosings (and Lady Catherine) for at least two whole months in the summer and often spent the entire winter little season at their London townhouse gifted to them upon their marriage by Thurston's mother, Lady Nottingham. All of the visiting between the families, though a bit of a headache when the children were little and raged against being confined to such long carriages rides as it took to get from Kent County to Derbyshire, was the foundation for this most auspicious of events as the engagement of Darcy's oldest daughter to Anne's oldest son.

The forth Bennet sister, Catherine, had also benefited greatly from her older sister's marriages. After being taken in full time by Darcy and Elizabeth, Catherine continued to improve greatly in her temperament and understanding. Three years after coming to live at Pemberley, Catherine was introduced to a cousin relation of Bingley's brother-in-law, Mr. Hurst. Richard Towneley is Lady Sefton's grandson and particular favorite. He was born the second son of Lady Sefton's daughter, Lady Caroline Harriett Towneley. While Richard was not set to inherit any land, he was named as Lady Sefton's heir to her personal London townhouse and a portion of the Lady's settlement. Catherine and Richard married in 1817 and had 5 children. Richard was the assistant doctor to Sir Andrew Halliday who is the official royal household Physician to the King, William IV and required to live full time in London to attend the King and his court. Following their marriage, Catherine and Richard lived in the Bingley's London

townhome, since the Bingleys were rarely in London. In 1825 the Towneleys moved into the Russel Square home of Bernard and Georgina (née Darcy) Finch while the Finches lived in Bombay, India. Today, Catherine and Richard, and their children, live full time with Lady Sefton, helping care for the aging Countess who is far into her eighth decade, but no less glorious as she was in her youth.

The Bennet sister who had come the farthest since that cruel August 20 years ago was undoubtedly Lydia. Now styled as the Lord Bishop Durham and Lady Durham, Lydia and Malcolm (Fitzwilliam) Dunelm were living a storied life. Malcolm officially adopted Thomas Wickham the year following their marriage then they proceeded to have three additional sons. Malcolm continued to rise through the ranks of the church and was appointed by his brother-in-law as the Bishop of Bristol and Swindon in 1818. Eight years later, he was elected by the council of bishops (with the help and campaigning from Mr. Darcy, Lord Bristol, Lord Matlock, Lady Sefton and her son the 3rd Earl of Sefton, Lord Nottingham, Lord Derby, and General Richard Fitzwilliam) as the Bishop of Durham and took the title as the *Right Reverend Father in God, Malcolm, by Divine Providence Lord Bishop of Durham*. In signatures, the bishop's family name is always replaced by "Dunelm," from the Latin name for Durham (the Latinised form of Old English Dunholm). Lydia and Malcolm, plus their four sons, moved into the newly refurbished Auckland Castle in 1826. Technically, the Bishop of Durham was a "prince-bishop" and Malcolm now outranked his earl cousins and brother-in-law.

The aforementioned General Richard Fitzwilliam, previously just a lowly Colonel, never married and continued with his military career through the end of the French wars. He earned his General rank given from Wellington personally for extreme bravery at Waterloo in 1815. Richard had been ordered to command a fresh-faced batch of young men straight from Newcastle and he brought home all but 20 of his 500 recruits. Richard managed to take over 1,000 French prisoners alive during the campaign using a large barn on a property just outside of the village of Braine-l'Alleud to bring 10 to 15 captives at a time and hold them all at gun point with only 10 or so British troops. He managed to turn the tides on the advancing British troops with minimal bloodshed and was handsomely rewarded. Now, the retired General spends most of his days in London living in a house recently purchased with his retirement commission money in Cheapside, just a block from the more fashionable addresses of Russel Square. He spends his time entertaining Georgiana (née Darcy) Finch's children, whom he insists call him Grand-Père since served and Georgiana's guardian for many years, with all of his embellished stories of a

soldier and war.

Georgiana and Bernard Finch married in the summer of 1814 and spent 11 years in London. Bernard worked with East India Trading Co. to help implement new schools mandated by the legislation he had originally drafted for Parliament. In 1825, Bernard was named as the educational and legal advisor to the Governor of Bombay which required that they move to India. Everyone was sad to see them go so far away, but it was such an honor, the Finches could not refuse. Georgiana and Bernard stayed in Bombay for 6 years until coming home to London the prior August to a permanent position as the Chief Advisor to Parliament on Indo-British trade relations.

Charlotte (née Lucas) and William Collins produced two daughters and no sons in five years of marriage. Unfortunately, William Collins followed his cousin Bennet to the Longbourn family grave plot in 1817 after losing a battle with consumption. The estate entail has been renewed by Malcolm Fitzwilliam, Fitzwilliam Darcy, Charles Bingley and Lord Bristol because Collins inherited the entail through a female ancestor. Mr. Bennet's grandfather, Josiah Bennet, had one son, Mr. Bennet's father, and one daughter who married Gerald Collins, a London banker. The Collinses had one son, Isaac Collins who was the cousin with whom Thomas Bennet had a feud. Then Isaac Collins had one son, William Collins. Under such circumstances, the law recognized Mr. Bennet's grandsons as the closest male relative of Mr. Josiah Bennet, the original entail holder, if William Collins had no sons.

So upon the untimely demise of William Collins, five year old Thomas Allen Bennet Fitzwilliam (formerly Wickham) was named the master of Longbourn. Unlike how Collins had treated the Bennet widow upon the previous master's death, the various men married to the Bennet sisters and the legal guardian of the young master of Longbourn decided to allow Charlotte and her daughters to continue living in the main house as long as they kept the estate in good order and didn't waste funds. Charlotte Collins was an intelligent woman and the particular friend of Elizabeth Darcy and happy to be settled in a home near her own family and friends. Charlotte was as good a trustee of the estate funds for her friends as she had been for her husband. Malcom, with the help of his land-owning brothers-in-law, installed a steward and oversaw the running of the estate in trust for his son until such time as Thomas could take his position as its master.

Now, at the age of 19 and with 2 years of Cambridge behind him, Thomas had taken full possession of the estate in April. While Thomas

was content to allow the Collins women to remain in the house for the time being, the first order of business was to have the Dower house completely refurbished over the course of the next few years while Thomas completed his studies. The house was to be ready for Charlotte upon the eventual marriage of Thomas, or more likely, the marriage of both of her daughters. It was decided that for the sake of propriety, during the summer months when Thomas will reside in Hertfordshire, Lady Gwyneth Fitzwilliam, Malcolm's mother, would come to stay as well so that there would be no question of misconduct between the 19-year-old master and his 18 and 16-year-old (distant) female cousins. It was also decided that the oldest Collins girl would have a season in town the next year with her Darcy and Bingley cousins in hopes of making a good match with the connection.

Finally, Mrs. Fanny Bennet had lived in her own small home on the edge of Meryton since 1814 which was purchased for her by her sons-in-law and brothers. Her £5,000 portion paid her enough annually in order to afford a cook, butler, and 2 maids plus a small one-horse phaeton which she learned to drive at the instruction of her brother Phillips. Many a fine day she could be seen riding her phaeton into town to visit with her sister Phillips or driving the three miles to the Lucas' or Longs' home for tea. After the death of William Collins and the inheritance of Longbourn by Lydia's son Thomas, Mrs. Bennet created a bit of a fuss that she should be allowed to move back in and keep the house as mistress again for her grandson.

She groused that Charlotte Collins should be treated no better by the Bennet family than she had been treated by the late Mr. Collins. It was an argument that certainly had some merit and rang true with Charlotte who still harbored a not small amount of guilt over how she came to be Mistress of Longbourn. However, the late Mr. Collins's will had provided a life estate interest in the property for his widow whereas Mr. Bennet had never thought to make such provisions for his own wife. So, Thomas's guardians could not legally eject the Collins widow from the property entirely. Additionally, the life estate entitled Charlotte Collins and her children to reasonably use the estate funds for own their living situation until Charlotte's death. Mrs. Bennett was not similarly entitled and would have had to run Longbourn on only her £5,000 share, which would not have gone far enough in the larger house which required more servants and upkeep. No one believed it would be a wise decision to have the two women live together and fight each day about which lady was the rightful Mistress and able to direct household funds as they deemed appropriate.

As a compromise, Charlotte allowed Mrs. Bennet to host one dinner a

month at Longbourn for her friends and the use of the estate's carriage each August for a month complete to visit her children at their various estates. After 14 years of peaceful existence and the enjoyment of her friends, Mrs. Bennet had settled into her home quite well enough to not even hint at moving back to Longbourn after Thomas had taken possession of the estate.

Elizabeth took one more look around the parlor at her assembled friends and family. With a silent prayer of thanks, she turned to her daughter and future son-in-law to indicate it was time to head to the ballroom to set up the receiving line. With a sense of peace, Elizabeth greeted her guests knowing that nothing the new generation could do would be worse than what they had endured 20 years ago, which had all turned out just fine in the end. The Darcy family reputation was no longer a concern for any of them.

End Notes

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Here is a rough of the original Pride and Prejudice, taken from <http://www.pemberley.com/janeinfo/ppchron.html>, with my changes at the end that lead into the story.

Fall of 1811

~ September 29 (Michaelmas) Bingley takes possession of Netherfield

~ October 10 Meryton Assembly

November 2 Jane invited to dinner at Netherfield and takes ill

November 3 Elizabeth comes to Netherfield to nurse Jane

November 17 Jane and Elizabeth leave Netherfield

November 26 The Netherfield Ball

Winter and Spring of 1812

January 7 Jane calls on the Bingley Sisters in London

~ March 5 Elizabeth travels to Hunsford to visit Charlotte

March 23 Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam (Richard) travel to Rosings

April 9 Darcy's First Proposal

April 10 Darcy's letter to Elizabeth

Summer of 1812

Early May Lydia travels to Brighton with the Fosters

~ June 15 Elizabeth and the Gardiners travel to Derbyshire

August 1 Lydia and Wickham Elope

August 4 Mr. Bennet travels to Town

Elizabeth and Gardiners tour Pemberley – Elizabeth and Darcy are reunited

August 5 Darcy, Georgiana, and Bingley call on Elizabeth and the Gardiners at the Rose and Crown Inn in Lambton

August 6 Elizabeth and the Gardiners visit with the Darcys and Bingleys at Pemberley

*Mr. Bennet Finds Lydia and Wickham in London Slums

August 7 *Dawn – Duel between Mr. Bennet and Wickham.

*Wickham killed with shot to the heart

*Mr. Bennet suffers shot to the leg.

After Breakfast Elizabeth reads both of Jane's letters and finds

about the elopement.

Elizabeth and Gardiners leave for Longbourn immediately and have to cancel dinner with the Darcys.

August 8 Darcy leaves for London

August 10 Elizabeth and Gardiners at Longbourn

Darcy arrives in London

August 11 Gardiners arrive in London

*Gardiner finds Lydia and Mr. Bennet at his home, Mr. Bennet severely ill from infection in gunshot wound.

August 11 – August 13 Darcy Tries to find Wickham and Lydia

*Mr. Bennet progressively worsens from infection.

August 13 *Mr. Bennet Dies

August 14 Darcy calls on the Gardiners

*Darcy discovers what has become of Bennet, Lydia, and Wickham

*Our story now begins ...

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